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Representations of Female Agency in Medieval French Literature

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REPRESENTATIONS OF FEMALE AGENCY IN MEDIEVAL FRENCH LITERATURE

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

in

The Department of French

by

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B.A., Université de Poitiers, 2013

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I dedicate this dissertation to my mother, who gave me the tools to become the strong and independent person I am today.

behind every strong woman is a story that gave her no choice.
Nakeia Homer

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Table of Contents

Acknowledgments	iv
Abstract.....	vii
Introduction. Gender roles and literary representations in the Middle Ages.....	1
Chapter 1. From Philomela to Philomena: transposing the myth in the 12 th century.....	16
Chapter 2. Too much power for one woman: shared agency in Cligès and Yvain ou le Chevalier au Lion.....	52
Chapter 3. Female agency in disguise: cross-dressing in Le Roman de Silence.....	88
Chapter 4. Turning fiction into reality: Christine de Pizan’s Ditié Jehanne Darc.....	118
Conclusion. Female Agency, Medieval Studies, and 21 st Century Teaching Methodologies.....	140
Appendix. The Willful Child.....	148
Works Cited.....	149
Vita	155

Abstract

This dissertation examines the different ways authors portray female agency in medieval French literature. In focusing on three medieval writers, Chrétien de Troyes, Heldris de Cornouailles and Christine de Pizan, I contend that female agency arises as a result of trauma or crisis. I define my terms as follows: agency is the capacity and intention of performing actions on one's own behalf. For a fictional character to have agency, therefore, she must be portrayed as having a sense of control and of being the owner of the action she executes. Additionally, I argue that as women characters assume their agency, they also demonstrate autonomy, that is to say that they act freely on personal motives. By the term trauma, I mean that authors put their fictional characters in a situation of severe upset resulting from physical or emotional injury. The word "trauma" originates from the Greek word for "wound"; I argue that agency can be developed during the healing process of an emotional wound. By crisis, I mean an extremely difficult or dangerous situation that, when reaching its most crucial point, forces these fictional characters to take action and make a decisive change in order to escape the predicament they find themselves in. Finally, during an era when gender roles were strictly defined and women were typically deprived of the freedom to make decisions for themselves, female characters had to find unusual ways to attain their goals. As Chrétien de Troyes and Heldris de Cornouailles show, female characters in fiction are especially constrained by tradition or law (before and during marriage); therefore, they need to disrupt social norms or seek the help of other women in order to act on their own volition. Christine de Pizan, by contrast, uses the example of a real person – Joan of Arc, who was alive during her time – to show of female agency becomes a tool to overcome challenges, disrupt social norms, and achieve greatness.

Introduction. Gender Roles and Literary Representations in the Middle Ages

PHRYNE. Why did you do it?

LYDIA. Not all of us did so well out of the war, Phryne. You inherited a title, but my family lost everything. And then I met John and he was wealthy, charming. Far too charming. And in the end, a hopeless businessman and an utter embarrassment. I rescued us from bankruptcy and disgrace. And I built an empire. All I wanted was my own life back, but John wouldn't let me have it. Judge me, if you like. But I saved myself.

PHRYNE. What a shame it took a life of crime for you to find your strength, Lydia.¹

Despite being taken from a television series set in 1920s Melbourne – and therefore being seemingly unrelated to medieval studies – this conversation between two female characters illustrates the question I propose to answer in this dissertation. What does it take for female characters to be represented as having agency? In this episode of the 2012 Australian show *Miss Fisher's Murder Mysteries*, Lydia has just admitted to being the criminal mastermind in charge of the local drug ring and to murdering her husband. As she explains, she only turned to crime after realizing that the man she married was a disappointment and did not meet her expectations, slowly leading them to financial and social ruin. Of course, her behavior is morally reprehensible and socially unacceptable – not to mention illegal – but in her mind her position was so unbearable that taking matters into her own hands and turning to crime seemed like the only solution available. Facing her crisis, she assessed the situation, and applied her predisposition for business to save herself.² Phryne's reaction further explains the problem faced by many female characters in fiction:

¹ "Cocaine Blues." *Miss Fisher's Murder Mysteries*, season 1, episode 1, ABC, 24 Feb. 2012. *Netflix*, <https://www.netflix.com/title/70259338>. If the show is not currently available on Netflix in the United States, a transcript of the episode can be found here <https://transcripts.foreverdreaming.org/viewtopic.php?f=288&t=18166&sid=f266ab3a7cd4911d94b7deffb929dc47>.

² Lydia's predisposition for business is mentioned a little later in the episode.

it takes a drastic situation to realize one's inherent strength and to begin using it against society's expectations.

While this conversation is far removed from the Middle Ages, it proves that questions concerning gender roles and society's expectations are still prevalent today. Evidently, the contexts in which discussions around gender and agency take place today are very different from what medieval authors knew, as women's rights have evolved in the past centuries in some places. The question, however, remains the same: how do authors portray female agency in fiction? To better appreciate the development of female agency in literary works from the Middle Ages, it is necessary to know the historical context in which they were composed. To understand what motivated authors of the 12th century to write about independent and self-governing female characters, we must therefore look at the condition of women in society during the medieval period.

There are two common contradictory misconceptions regarding women's social status in the medieval period: 1) that the Middle Ages was a dark period during which women were solely considered as inferior to men or, 2) that women had much more power than we are led to believe. The reality of the status of women and of gender roles, however, is a little more complex than these two statements imply. Bonnie Anderson and Judith Zinsser identify two key elements that can help determine the role and place of women in the Middle Ages: first, that gender is "the most important factor in shaping the lives of women. Unlike men, [...] women have traditionally been viewed first as women, a separate category of being."³ Men, on the other hand, were divided by factors such as class, region, occupation... The second factor is that traditionally, and until very recently, women have been defined within the context of their relationships to men.

³ *A History of Their Own: Women in Europe from Prehistory to the Present*. Harper & Row, 1988, p. xv.

Concurrently with these restrictive gender roles, however, we must consider the development of the notion of the individual. While the ‘discovery of the individual’ seems to strangely coincide with major turning points in history (the Antiquity, the 12th century, the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, the 19th century...), Jean-Claude Schmitt informs us that this notion “s’est cristallisée peu à peu sur l’un de ces moments privilégiés : le XII^{ème} siècle occidental.” (gradually crystallized in one of these privileged moments: the 12th century in the West).⁴ Schmitt is concerned with understanding what made historians look at the 12th century as a particularly important moment in time for the idea of individuality.⁵ According to his analysis, multiple factors can explain this focus: simultaneous birth of the idea of the individual and of the State, or the rise of urbanization allowing for the notion of private life for instance. He associates the notion of the individual with that of self-awareness, emphasized in the 12th century by an increase in biographies and autobiographies testifying to a new interest in the singularity of individual destinies. Another major element to consider is the rise of Christianity and the influence of the Church in people’s daily lives. Indeed, several innovations brought on by the Christian religion can be seen as foundations for individuality. The relationship between man and God led people to introspection, as the idea of penitence, for example, was developed, and attitudes towards death changed. Schmitt states, “s’il y eut ‘découverte de l’individu’ au XII^{ème} siècle, l’attitude devant la mort et surtout devant le jugement particulier qui était censé la suivre de peu en fut un creuset très important.” (if there was a ‘discovery of the individual’ in the 12th century, the attitude towards death and especially before the particular judgment which was supposed to follow it

⁴ Jean-Claude Schmitt, *Le corps, les rites, les rêves, le temps. Essais d’anthropologie médiévale*, pp. 241-242. Translations are mine except when a source is specified.

⁵ For his full analysis, see Schmitt’s essay pp. 241-262, particularly note 2 on page 249, in which he lists the main scholarly works on the notions of the individual and of self-awareness published since 1969.

shortly was a very important aspect).⁶ Faced with their mortality and fear of purgatory, people become conscious of the immediate consequences of their actions and try to do penance before they die.

Schmitt specifies, however, that despite this new focus on the self, “l’individu isolé restait suspect et, à plus forte raison, la femme seule était difficilement concevable.” (an isolated individual remained suspect and, all the more so, a woman alone was hardly conceivable).⁷ Indeed, if we consider the role of Christianity in the development of the idea of the individual, we must also consider the Church’s position on gender roles.

Women were understood as less than men, female attributes as less good than male ones, and gender relations as properly characterized by womanly submission and manly governance. Theology had pride of place in these discussions not only because so much medieval learning was produced in religious contexts but also because religious inquiry then included almost all knowledge. For example, natural philosophy, which we today call science, explained God’s creation, and political theory taught how humans should operate within God’s rules. Gender rules were similarly God-given, and the submission of women to men paralleled the submission of all humanity to God.⁸

Additionally, while initially Jesus’ teachings made little distinction between men and women, “women’s inherently ‘weaker’ nature, their role in the fall from divine grace, and their periodic ‘uncleanness’ were cited to exclude women from positions of responsibility and leadership they had [previously] enjoyed.”⁹ The propagation of Christian values, as we see, greatly influenced the definition of a woman’s appropriate position and reduced it to two essential roles: “She should be an obedient wife and a prolific mother.”¹⁰ In such relationships, women’s voices were

⁶ Ibid, p. 254.

⁷ Ibid., p. 255.

⁸ Judith M. Bennett and Ruth Mazo Karras, “Women, Gender, and Medieval Historians,” *The Oxford Handbook of Women and Gender in Medieval Europe*, p. 5.

⁹ *A History of Their Own: Women in Europe from Prehistory to the Present*, pp. 80-81.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 81.

automatically silenced; they always came second to men and were regarded as accessory to the relationships in which their body was a commodity.

Medieval authors, thus, had to maneuver this dual-faceted context as they imagined their female characters: on the one hand, the notion of the individual was expanding through the Christian Church, and on the other hand this same religion largely caused women to be treated as lesser human beings. In *Woman Defamed and Woman Defended*, Alcuin Blamires shows how this latter aspect of religion influenced literature, and he reminds his reader that although feminist movements of the late 20th century have shined a light on women's voices in medieval writings, medieval literature was predominantly misogynistic. "The present anthology seeks in its turn to introduce the major antifeminist texts from the twelfth century to the beginning of the fifteenth."¹¹ The anthology indeed illustrates how widespread women hatred was as it compiles texts from different origins (Roman, Greek, French, German, Italian, and English) and genres (scripture, law, romances, letters, treatise, poetry). To balance these works and demonstrate that not all medieval literature defamed women, Blamires included two sections at the end showcasing texts that defended them. These two sections, however, occupy a lot less space in the volume. "Responses to Antifeminism" and "A Woman Defends Women" (dedicated to Christine de Pizan) tell us that some authors explored different views. He points out, however, that "by segregating defence from attack, this anthology simplifies a situation whereby these impulses were sometimes directly juxtaposed or entwined in the same author or even the same work."¹² Although he allocates space to demonstrate that antifeminist allegations were answered, he prefaces his work by reminding his reader that "The chief objective is nevertheless to show how deeply etched were the conventions

¹¹ Blamires, *Woman Defamed and Woman Defended*, p. vii.

¹² *Ibid.*, p.223.

and the rhetoric of misogyny, and how people started to engage with them.”¹³ We can infer from these various statements that medieval literature was not simply either anti- or pro-women, but instead it was a complex mix of both.

Based on his overall conclusion that misogyny was more prevalent, however, it could come as a surprise that some authors did represent women in a way that exceeded society’s expectations. Literature, as a form of art, is a place for writers to express their desires or curiosities. Authors could depart from reality and use fiction as a technique to convey a message or experiment with different ways to maneuver life. Donald Maddox suggests:

if ‘history’ and ‘fiction’ do not normally constitute a pertinent opposition in medieval narrative, it is not because medieval authors were incapable of distinguishing them. The example drawn from Chrétien de Troyes [in *Cligès*] would suggest that these writers were no less aware of the difference than their descendants, but that they were less concerned with veracity *per se* than with the effects that might be achieved through selective integration of mimetic and historical detail with fictive elements.¹⁴

Taking his reasoning into consideration, the idea that medieval authors may have portrayed female characters with much more agency and independence than their real-life counterparts seems less far-fetched. If they do not trouble themselves with accurately depicting their society but instead simply ensure that readers can infer the setting of their story from details, they are more liberated to innovate with what this same society could be – or become. Besides, if we consider one of the characteristics of medieval romances to reproduce the features of the period that produced them, then the writers’ experimentations would only serve to better reflect the mores of their time. As Charles Krick pointed out: “Tandis que l’histoire ne nous donne que les simples faits, [les romans du moyen âge] nous peignent l’esprit, les mœurs, l’aspect général du temps, tout ce qui s’efface et

¹³ Ibid., p. viii.

¹⁴ Donald Maddox, “Pseudo-Historical Discourse in Fiction: *Cligès*.” *Essays in French Literature Presented to Barbara M. Craig*, p. 9. His emphasis.

disparaît dans les froides chroniques.” (While history only gives us the simple facts, [the novels of the Middle Ages] paint us the spirit, the manners, the general aspect of the time, all that fades and disappears in the cold chronicles).¹⁵ Medieval authors’ additions or commentaries in their writing thus grant us a more comprehensive insight in the ideas and thoughts that shaped their time.

Furthermore, if we accept that authors were consciously bypassing agreed upon societal norms to create new ones, we can also assume that they carefully selected what aspects of life they manipulated in their work. In his analysis of sexual aggression in the works of Chrétien de Troyes, D.D.R. Owen asserts that the medieval author “used themes and motifs as structural units, helping to give internal cohesion to the individual romances and also providing points of cross-reference between them.”¹⁶ For instance, his dominant themes are love and chivalry, which he examines in every romance, albeit from different points of view. Indeed, Chrétien’s tales are famous for being built around courtly love tropes and knightly adventures. He also suggests that “what we have in these romances is [...] a series of case studies developed from the inherited *matière*, but with the events themselves holding for Chrétien less intrinsic interest than did the areas of human conduct and experience they offered for his investigation.”¹⁷ While Owen’s article is focused on sexual aggression, his analysis can be extended to a variety of themes, including female agency. Although I will only examine a portion of his work in this dissertation, I would argue that Chrétien portrays female characters in a proto-feminist manner throughout his romances. An obvious example is the eponymous heroine in *Érec et Énide*, in which Énide defies society’s gendered expectations by speaking when forbidden to do so by her husband. As Érec ignores her presence, she uses her

¹⁵ Krick, Charles. *Les données sur la vie sociale et privée des Français au XIIème siècle contenues dans les romans de Chrestien de Troyes*, p. 3.

¹⁶ Owen, D D. R. "Theme and Variations: Sexual Aggression in Chrétien De Troyes, p. 376.

¹⁷ Ibid., his emphasis.

(literal) voice as the only resort to warn him when they face danger and, in the process, finds her (metaphorical) voice. Grace Armstrong remarks:

Enide's experience as a married speaker falls into three phases: 1) the emergence of her abrupt, but effective discourse which is unwelcome to Erec's ears; 2) a period of verbal apprenticeship in which she learns to control and refine speech, principally in interior monologue, but also in exchanges with Erec; and 3) a stage of verbal mastery akin to that of the *clerc* in which she manipulates reality and exerts authority over others.¹⁸

Here, Chrétien shows us that, out of fear and frustration, Énide discovers and gradually explores her agency. Chrétien carries out the theme of female agency from this first romance to *Perceval ou le conte du Graal*, where extraordinary women are not main characters but instead influence the story and guide the male characters by speaking out.

Additionally, gender politics play an important role in the way authors examine particular motifs and experiment with them. It is safe to assume that a writer's gender influences his or her work, as their personal experience of society can only dictate the way they reimagine life in their fiction. This seems especially important when depicting gender roles: men and women authors often write about female agency very differently. When portrayed by male authors – such as Chrétien de Troyes and Heldris de Cornouailles – women characters cannot develop agency naturally but have to experience some form of hardship before they are granted this power, as if the authors were preemptively justifying their characters' exceptionality before facing society's criticism. On the contrary, in a text written by a female author – Christine de Pizan, for instance – agency is a God-given gift meant to be used for the greater good and to benefit all people. Moreover, whereas the female characters in *Philomena*, *Cligès*, *Yvain* and *Le Roman de Silence* are fictional, Christine dedicates her *Ditié Jehanne Darc* to a living woman, whose accomplishments have since then been historically – and fictionally – recorded. These texts, along

¹⁸ Armstrong, Grace M. "Enide and Fenice: Chrétien de Troyes's Clerkly Heroines." pp. 2-3.

with Ovid's *Philomela* in *Metamorphosis*, reveal a progression in the portrayal of female agency in medieval French literature. As I will demonstrate, the conditions in which women characters find their agency become less violent in time. Studied together, these texts show that many medieval authors were concerned with issues related to gender roles and experimented with these issues in their writing. Independently, they illustrate how a similar idea can be developed in multiple ways based on the author's particular situation and interests.

Different theories concerned with the development of the subject as well as feminist theories can help examine the portrayal of agency in medieval literature. Looking at Foucault's discussion of the cultivation of the self, for instance, I argue that female characters are portrayed as realizing the possibility – and the need – to be their own subject in the aftermath of some form of traumatic event or crisis. In volume three of *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault discusses the growing importance of the notion of individualism in relation to the rise of Christianity and its values. Commenting on “the demands of sexual austerity” as a consequence of the new religion, he observes that “their context is characterized by [...] the development of what might be called a ‘cultivation of the self,’ wherein the relations of oneself to oneself were intensified and valorized.”¹⁹ This connection he establishes between religion and selfhood is crucial, as the notion of individuality can be partially connected to early Christianity and this religion was an essential part of life in the Middle Ages.

In the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel tries to understand how a human being comes to consciousness of itself as a self. According to him, the discovery of self-consciousness is not something that can be done alone, but rather it can only happen in the presence of another being. “Self-consciousness is faced by another self-consciousness; it has come *out of itself*. This has a

¹⁹ Foucault, *The Care of the Self, Volume 3 of The History of Sexuality*, pp. 41-43.

twofold significance: first, it has lost itself, for it finds itself as an *other* being; secondly, in doing so it has superseded the other, for it does not see the other as an essential being, but in the other sees its own self.”²⁰ We can observe this phenomenon when looking at the female characters in the works I analyze: as I will show, they are portrayed as discovering their agency – their self-consciousness – when interacting with or encountering other characters.

Simone de Beauvoir’s most famous phrase can help understand further the development of agency for female characters in relation to the society they live in: “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman.”²¹ This well-known first sentence that begins book two of *The Second Sex* expresses Beauvoir’s theory that genders are equal at birth. According to her, gender-specific roles are part of our psyche “because the influence of others upon the child is a factor from the start, and thus [we are] indoctrinated with [a] vocation from [our] earliest years.”²² Despite the fact that she developed this idea in the 20th century, gender roles have been a consequence of anatomy both in real life and literary representations for centuries, leaving women – real or fictional – with the difficult task of going beyond society’s expectations if they wish to deviate from their assigned roles. As we will see, when female characters in fictional texts are made conscious of the harsh reality and prospects of their existence, they devise creative solutions to gain access to typically male roles and places.

As part of her work on feminism and the place of the body in our culture, Susan Bordo discusses the idea that practical consequences of society’s gender structure directly affect women’s bodies. She especially mentions that the body doesn’t just reflect culture but becomes a tool with which women are controlled: “The body is not only a *text* of culture. It is also, as anthropologist

²⁰ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 111.

²¹ From *The Second Sex*, p. 267.

²² *Ibid*, p. 268.

Pierre Bourdieu and philosopher Michel Foucault (among others) have argued, a *practical*, direct locus of social control.”²³ Most visible in recent years with everchanging trends, women modify their bodies in response to society’s demands. She argues, however, that this strategy of control can be reversed, but reversing it requires women to adopt extreme behaviors. For example, reacting to society’s expectation of slenderness, many women become anorexic; although not a healthy response, it can be interpreted as a way to reject this cultural aesthetic demand. Bordo also observes that women, while being taught how to be feminine, need to adopt masculine attitudes if they want to be accepted as equals in certain areas, such as the workplace: “even as young women today continue to be taught traditionally ‘feminine’ virtues, to the degree that the professional arena is open to them they must also learn to embody the ‘masculine’ language and values of that arena – self-control, determination, cool, emotional discipline, mastery, and so on.”²⁴ This phenomenon will become visible in the medieval literature in my corpus: Philomena and Procné who reproduce the violence they have witnessed from a male character, Silence who consciously disguises herself so she can live life as a man, and Jeanne d’Arc who also dressed as a male for various reasons – mainly to protect herself from physical harm in battle or from sexual assault while in prison.

Additionally, I will use Sara Ahmed’s *Willful Subjects* to understand the role of the will in the development of the authors’ depiction of their women characters. Among others, she develops the idea that “willfulness might be what we do when we are judged as being *not*, as not meeting the criteria for being human, for instance. Not to meet the criteria for human is often to be attached to other nots, not human as not being: not being white, not being male, not being straight, not being able-bodied.”²⁵ Female characters, therefore, develop a particular willfulness simply for being

²³ Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight*, p. 165. (Bordo’s emphasis)

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 171.

²⁵ Ahmed, Sara. *Willful Subjects*. Duke University Press, 2014, p. 15.

born women in a society that privileges men. Ahmed also explores the idea that the will is not static but evolves with a person. It “is understood not as something a subject has, or experiences itself as having, but as what a subject develops, or must develop to a greater or lesser extent, over time.”²⁶ Reading medieval authors who experiment with gender roles in their writing in light of Ahmed’s concept will help understand how they portray female agency: regardless of the context they are in, they develop their agency as their will to reach their goal increases.

Very few scholars of medieval French literature have dedicated studies to literary representations of women. When critics did focus on female characters, at first – in the 1970s – they viewed these characters not as independent entities but as supporting the male characters’ journey or development. However, the field evolved under the influence of feminist criticism as the number of medieval women scholars grew in the 1980s. Among these studies, many critics argue that it is possible to read beyond the commonly accepted misogyny and sexism in medieval French texts to hear the voice of female characters, either as a metaphorical voice or as a literal one.

No scholar to date, however, has studied authors’ representations of female agency in medieval French literature. This is exactly what I analyze in my dissertation. In focusing on three medieval writers, Chrétien de Troyes, Helldris de Cornouailles and Christine de Pizan, I contend that female agency arises as a result of trauma or crisis. I define my terms as follows: agency is the capacity and intention of performing actions on one’s own behalf. For a fictional character to have agency, therefore, she must be portrayed as having a sense of control and of being the owner of the action she executes. Additionally, I argue that as women characters assume their agency, they also demonstrate autonomy, that is to say that they act freely on personal motives. By the

²⁶ Ibid., p. 61.

term trauma, I mean that authors put their fictional characters in a situation of severe upset resulting from physical or emotional injury. The word “trauma” originates from the Greek word for “wound”; I argue that agency can be developed during the healing process of an emotional wound. By crisis, I mean an extremely difficult or dangerous situation that, when reaching its most crucial point, forces these fictional characters to take action and make a decisive change in order to escape the predicament they find themselves in. Finally, during an era when gender roles were strictly defined and women were typically deprived of the freedom to make decisions for themselves, female characters had to find unusual ways to attain their goals. As Chrétien and Heldris²⁷ show, female characters in fiction are especially constrained by tradition or law (before and during marriage); therefore, they need to disrupt social norms or seek the help of other women in order to act on their own volition. Christine by contrast, uses the example of a real person – Joan of Arc, who was alive during her time – to show how female agency becomes a tool to overcome challenges, disrupt social norms, and achieve greatness.

The first chapter analyzes how Chrétien de Troyes became the first author in the early modern era to depict female agency in medieval French literature. This chapter explores the context in which the author introduced agency for female characters in fiction by translating the tale of *Philomela* from Ovid’s *Metamorphosis* and adapting it to the culture of the 12th century. This chapter also demonstrates that, in these literary works, the development of agency is portrayed as a response to a traumatic event – rape in the story of Philomena – and the subsequent exploration of this new-found agency is the female character’s only avenue to survive her experience. By modifying and adapting Ovid’s original story to 12th-century French culture, Chrétien de Troyes

²⁷ Based on my readings of scholarly studies of their works, I have observed that it is customary to refer to these medieval authors by their first name. I will therefore refer to them as Chrétien, Heldris and Christine from this point on.

promoted the idea of female agency in medieval literature. Among the changes he brought, the most prominent one is the language: by translating the Latin text to Old French, Chrétien really appropriated the text and rendered it accessible to an audience larger than just the educated population. He also emphasized the passage from an oral to a written tradition, made references to Christianity, and made literary references to courtly love tropes only a 12th-century readership could fully comprehend.

Chrétien's representation of female agency becomes more nuanced in some of his later works, which are at the center of the second chapter: we will see how he portrays female agency by dividing it and distributing it between two characters. This phenomenon is visible in *Cligès* and *Yvain ou le Chevalier au Lion*, his second and fourth romances. In these stories, the female characters studied are pairs constituted of a lady and her confidante – first Fénice and Thessala, then Laudine and Lunette. The author's portrayal shows them as going through a crisis in order to gain agency, which takes the form of a solution to their predicament. Contrary to the characters in chapter 1, the protagonists cannot claim individual agency but are forced to share it. The crises to be solved are, respectively, escaping marriage with an unwanted husband to experience true love and finding – and keeping – a new husband to protect the land after becoming a widow. In both cases, the confidante provides invaluable assistance to the lady, leading to this portrayal of a split agency. This chapter highlights a noteworthy class issue in these texts: there is an uneven distribution of power, as the servants' agency serves to facilitate the successful salvation of the lady they serve.

The third chapter focuses on the story of Silence by Heldris de Cornouailles, in which he portrays cross-dressing as a condition for female agency. Here too, the protagonist is seen as undergoing a crisis before she is allowed to show any agency. Because women were barred from

inheriting the family's property, Cador decides to raise his daughter as a son, deceiving the King but also creating a warped reality for Silence. After spending the first twelve years of her life as a boy, she is faced with the truth about her birth. This moment proves to be a challenge to overcome: upon realizing that her anatomy and her assumed gender contradict each other, Silence displays agency by weighing the pros and cons and making an educated decision to maintain her masculine identity. This chapter explores notions of gender in 12th-century France as well as the opposition between nature and nurture.

Fictional representation make way for history in the final chapter, which considers *Le ditié Jehanne Darc*, a text written by a female author who praises a real-life heroine and her exceptional characteristics: Christine de Pizan and Joan of Arc, whose lives are intertwined in the poem. Written in 1429 – in the lifetime of both the author and the subject – it can be read as a testimony to the exceptional characteristics of both women: with Christine's pen and Joan's sword, there is a compelling metaphorical relationship between the tools they wielded as a demonstration of their agency. This chapter explains that Pizan portrays each of them as discovering her self and agency as a means to solve a crisis: Christine de Pizan pursued writing when she became solely responsible for the care of her family and Joan of Arc decided to go to war for the King of France as a response to a divine intervention. They were pioneers in their own way, transforming female agency from a literary concept into a reality.

Chapter 1. From *Philomela* to *Philomena*: Transposing the Myth in the 12th Century

Elle resta longtemps dans cette situation,
tant qu'à la fin, sous la pression de nécessité [...] elle a alors conçu un plan

-- Chrétien de Troyes
Philomena

When asked to name important figures in the field of medieval literature, no scholar could reply without mentioning Chrétien de Troyes – if he's not their first answer, then he's typically within the first five names they think of. This prominence, however, does not imply that we know all about his life. Like most authors of the Middle Ages, any biographical information we know – or think we know – about Chrétien is deduced from analyzing his work.¹ From events and patrons he mentions throughout his writing, it is generally accepted that he lived in northern France and produced the majority of his work during the 1160s-1191. His name has led to many speculations about his origin, religion, and occupation; however, as Matilda Bruckner summarizes it, “Chrétien as author represents an invention constructed not only by what he wrote but what medieval writers and rubricators or modern scholars do or do not ascribe to him.”²

Chrétien de Troyes is, today, one of the most read and studied medieval French authors, and yet not all his work has received the same level of attention. While his five romances are well known, the story of *Philomena* has not always been considered as important in the author's body of work.³ A possible explanation for this discrepancy is that this text was forgotten until the late

¹ Jean Frappier, *Chrétien de Troyes*, p. 5.

² Matilda Brucker, “Chrétien de Troyes,” p. 80.

³ Cornelis de Boer published *Philomena, conte raconté d'après Ovide* in 1909, but since then most studies of the tale have been articles or book chapters. In his *Chrétien de Troyes Revisited* (1995), Karl Uitti studies the five romances extensively but only dedicates three pages to *Philomena* in an appendix.

19th century when Gaston Paris read *l'Ovide moralisé* and uncovered the tale. A testimony to the continuous fascination for the Latin poet and dated to the late 13th or early 14th century, the *Ovide moralisé* is

the first full translation of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* into French; its author translates from Latin to French, but he also translates knowledge and meaning in line with medieval understandings of *translatio*. In this massive compilation of more than seventy-two thousand lines, translations of the *Metamorphoses*, supplemented from other mythographical sources, glosses, and commentaries, make up almost two-thirds of the text, and the translator's historical and allegorical interpretations more than a third. The *Ovide moralisé* most often refers to the translated Ovidian story as a fable (*une fable*), that is, a fabulous, fictional story, and as a fable, the story would seem to call for explanation, or for a moral that transforms it into a lesson. But unlike most fables—we think most readily of beast fables, where animal behavior is interpreted in moral lessons for humans—Ovid's fables can be explained by history, or at least this is the translator's perspective as he supplies a historical judgment (*une historial sentence*) of the story's veracity, that is a euhemerist reading that identifies the historical events or characters that could have inspired the mythological story. The historical explanation is followed by an allegorical reading of the Ovidian story, often many times longer than the euhemerist interpretation, and the elaborate explanations of Christian allegorical meaning reveal the translator's main interest.⁴

In addition to the stories taken from the *Metamorphoses* to which he ascribes new meaning rooted in a Christian perspective of the world, the anonymous author claims to have copied tales from other sources, some in Latin and some in French. Among these is included *Philomena*, which is attributed to a "Chrétien." Although Chrétien mentions *La Métamorphose de la huppe, de l'aronde et du rossignol* ("the transformation of the hoopoe, the swallow and the nightingale") as one of his previous works in the introduction to *Cligès*, the only extant manuscript of *Philomena*⁵ is the one found in the *Ovide moralisé*, which led to interrogations about the tale's authorship. After having read numerous discussions surrounding this debate, for the purpose of this dissertation, I will join

⁴ McCracken, Peggy. "Human Being and Animal Becoming in the *Ovide moralisé*." pp. 1-2.

⁵ Although it is not the title he announced in the prologue, Chrétien de Troyes' version of the story is commonly discussed as *Philomena*, title which I will use from now on.

the general consensus assuming that Chrétien is indeed the author of this translation and that it was likely written before the romances.⁶

It is important to note that the author of the *Ovide moralisé* used a variety of sources for his poem, which can be inferred from references he makes when not directly translating Ovid's *Metamorphosis*. As Boer remarks, the anonymous author took inspiration in many Latin works, but openly plagiarized two tales: "On sait que l'auteur de l'*Ovide moralisé* a pris à Chrétien de Troyes sa traduction de la métamorphose de Philomèle, de Térée et de Procné, comme il a emprunté à un auteur normand inconnu du XII^e siècle son adaptation de l'histoire de Pyrame et Thisbé." (We know that the author of the *Ovide moralisé* took from Chrétien de Troyes his translation of the metamorphosis of the hoopoe, the swallow and the nightingale, just like he borrowed from a 12th century anonymous Norman author his adaptation of the story of Pyrame and Thisbe).⁷ Even though it is Chrétien's assumed work that is included in the *Ovide moralisé*, his version is first and foremost a retelling in Old French of Ovid's tale *Philomela*, from the Latin poet's *Metamorphosis*.

Read side by side, Ovid's *Philomela* and Chrétien's *Philomena* appear very similar as they tell the same story. The French author's version stands out, however, because, as I will further explain, he did not produce a simple translation of the Latin text but added details that specifically anchored his text in 12th-century French culture and society. While the tale is not entirely his creation, I have chosen to study Chrétien's story in my first chapter because I believe that it is the first text to portray female agency in the French literary tradition.

⁶ This topic was discussed by many after Gaston Paris' "discovery" of the poem in the *Ovide moralisé*, for example by Elisabeth Schulze-Busacker in "*Philomena*. Une révision de l'attribution de l'oeuvre" (1986) or Roberta L. Krueger in "Philomena: Brutal Transitions and Courtly Transformations in Chrétien's Old French Translation" (2005).

⁷ Boer, Cornelis de. *Ovide moralisé; poème du commencement du quatorzième siècle*, pp. 21-27.

To understand how the adaptation differs from its source one should look at the difference between Antiquity and the Middle Ages concerning love, sexuality, and religious beliefs. Indeed, the transition from paganism to Christianity brought changes that affected both public and private life. Such contrasts and their effects have been discussed by many scholars over time. Paul Veyne in *Sexe et pouvoir à Rome* tells us, for instance, that divorce in Ancient Rome was as easy as marriage and that either party could initiate it, or that marriage was considered a civic duty. Marriage in the Middle Ages had more defined purposes, such as creating alliances with other families; and because of Catholicism the notion of divorce was not a possibility. The institution of marriage in medieval society, as Georges Duby phrases it, is “by its very position and by the role which it assumes, enclosed in a rigid framework of rituals and prohibitions,”⁸ much more rigid, therefore, than it had been in Antiquity. Jean-Claude Milner in *Constats* also studies the question of the transformation of relationships through the prism of sexuality. According to Milner, philosophers of Antiquity considered that pleasure, love, and coitus could not be achieved simultaneously; the advent of Christianity, however, changed this view, all the while affecting relationships between men and women. Marriage (its regulations and constraints), sexual relations (openness about the question, the freedom to choose partners or not), the role and status of a woman (in society and in her family) are therefore very different in Chrétien’s time compared to the context in which Ovid wrote, and *Philomena* reflects these changes.

Literature of Antiquity has always been an important source of inspiration for authors, even though each century and each author has modified the borrowed material to better adapt the stories to their time. Chrétien is not an exception to this trend and his *Philomena* bears multiple changes that teach us a great deal about the growth of culture and attest literary trends in the 12th century.

⁸ Duby, Georges. *Love and Marriage in the Middle Ages*, p. 4.

The first and most obvious of these is the name of the heroine. While in Ovid's version the name is 'Philomela,' Chrétien used the name 'Philomena' for his leading lady. Two scholars of medieval French literature have offered theories to justify for this difference. First, Gaston Paris provided a two-fold explanation:

Enfin, je citerai encore les formes usitées en bas-latin et, par suite, dans la littérature vulgaire du moyen âge, de deux noms propres, *Dalida* pour *Dalila* et *Philomena* pour *Philomèla*. Ces formes remontent très haut. *Dalida* avait sans doute l'accent sur l'*i* quand il s'est dissimulé, et offre un exemple d'une loi qui me paraît probable et d'après laquelle une intervocale tonique (j'entends commençant la syllabe tonique) dissimilerait une intervocale atone. Quant à *Philomena*, il est plus difficile à expliquer, puisque ce serait plutôt la seconde *l* que la première qui pourrait être considérée comme tonique. Il y a peut-être eu confusion avec le nom de femme *Philomena* (pour *Philumena* = φιλουμένη), très connu à cause de la vierge et martyre de ce nom.⁹

(Finally, I will also cite the forms used in Latin and, consequently, in the vulgar literature of the Middle Ages, of two proper names, *Dalida* for *Dalila* and *Philomena* for *Philomèla*. These forms go back very far. *Dalida* undoubtedly had the accent on the *i* when it was concealed, and offers an example of a law which seems probable to me and according to which a tonic intervocal (I hear starting the tonic syllable) would conceal an atonic intervocal. As for *Philomena*, it is more difficult to explain, since it would likely be the second *l* than the first which could be considered as tonic. There may have been confusion with the name of woman *Philomena* (for *Philumena* = φιλουμένη), very well-known because of the virgin and martyr of this name)

Here he tells us that the difference in the name can either be a linguistic one, with a phonological change happening through time, or merely a confusion between the name of the character and the Catholic Saint Philomena. The second explanation is provided by Cornelius de Boer when he presents the manuscript of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* he used for his research: "Ce manuscrit date du 14^e siècle: comme dans tous les autres manuscrits d'Ovide copiés en France on y trouve le nom de l'héroïne principale de notre conte écrit avec un *n* (*Philomena*). C'est donc sur un manuscrit analogue que Chrétien a travaillé." (This manuscript dates from the 14th century: as in all the other Ovid manuscripts copied in France, we find the name of the main heroine of our tale written with

⁹ Gaston Paris, *Mélanges linguistiques*, pp. 147-148.

an *n* (Philomena). It is therefore on a similar manuscript that Chrétien worked).¹⁰ According to him, most manuscripts of the *Metamorphoses* during Chrétien's time spelled the heroine's name with an *n* instead of the *l* found today in most versions of Ovid's work. Chrétien, then, would simply have written his version using a similar manuscript to the one Boer used for his doctoral thesis.

The second major modification is the language used by authors: in Chrétien's time, Old French was becoming more common than Latin (outside of the clergy). *Philomena*, however, is not simply a translation from Latin to Old French, and, as Sylvia Roustant phrases it, "l'auteur doit aussi adapter le texte aux préoccupations et aux goûts de son époque" therefore achieving "une transformation, plus qu'une translation." (the author must also adapt the text to the concerns and tastes of his time "therefore achieving" a transformation, more than a translation).¹¹ Furthermore, with modifications to make the story fit his time, Chrétien not only distances himself from the ancient source, but also establishes himself as an innovator in the 12th century. Wagih Azzam discusses this: "l'antiquité fournit à la langue romane la matière de sa littérature naissante. Translater la fable, en la renouvelant pour la tirer du silence et en révéler une vérité, participe de l'aventure de l'écrivain médiéval en quête de son écriture propre." (the Antiquity provided the Romance language with the material for its nascent literature. Translating the fable, renewing it to extract it from silence and reveal its truth, is part of the adventure of the medieval writer in search of his own writing).¹² It is safe to say that Chrétien de Troyes was in many ways a pioneer for French literature, both in terms of content and form. Chrétien was one of the first authors to make

¹⁰ Cornelius de Boer, *Philomena, conte raconté d'après Ovide*, p. 123. This explanation is also mentioned in notes by Patricia Terry in *The Honeysuckle and the Hazel Tree: Medieval Stories of Men and Women*. University of California Press, 1995. See note 31 from the introduction.

¹¹ Roustant, Sylvia. "Philomena de Chretien de Troyes: Métamorphose d'une métamorphose au temps du roman." p.64.

¹² Azzam, Wagih. "Le printemps de la littérature. La « translation » dans Philomena de Crestiens Li Gois." p. 56.

his works accessible to a greater public by writing in Old French instead of Latin as he announces in the prologue to *Cligès*:

Celui qui fit *Érec et Énide* et les *Commandements* d'Ovide, qui mit en roman *L'Art d'amour*, qui fit *La Morsure de l'épaule*, *Le Roi Marc et Yseut la Blonde*, *La Métamorphose de la huppe*, *de l'aronde et du rossignol* ¹³

(The author of the story of Erec and Enide, who translated into French Ovid's commands and the Art of Love, composed the Shoulder Bite, the tales of King Mark and the fair-haired Iseut, and of the metamorphosis of the hoopoe, the swallow and the nightingale)

Here, Chrétien declares that he wrote his adaptations of Ovid's works, as well as his first romance, in *roman*, the language of the people. In the 9th century, Latin became more and more the language of the educated and the clergy while *roman* developed as a popular language, seen as barbaric by Latin-speakers: "L'écart entre le latin classique et la langue parlée était devenu tel qu'il n'était plus possible de comprendre un texte latin sans une étude sérieuse. La renaissance du latin classique devait donc mettre les choses au point. [...] De ce fait, le latin devient une langue savante, nettement distincte du parler populaire." (The gap between classical Latin and the spoken language had grown so much that it was no longer possible to understand a Latin text without serious study. The revival of classical Latin was therefore to set things straight. [...] As a result, Latin becomes a learned language, clearly distinct from popular speech).¹⁴ This shift towards the ancestor of modern French made official in the 9th century (first by the Council of Tours in 813, then by the Oaths of Strasbourg in 842) therefore made Chrétien's work popular.

By executing his translation of *Philomela*, he transports the story into a new linguistic era. His innovation, however, goes beyond the question of language. Despite the fact that the plot is the same whether you read the Latin text or the Old French translation, Chrétien made a number

¹³ Chrétien de Troyes, *Oeuvres complètes*. Edited by Daniel Poirion, Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 2009, prologue to *Cligès*, p. 174. Translations of the romances are by D.D.R. Owen.

¹⁴ Wartburg, Walther von. *Évolution et structure de la langue française*. Editions A. Francke, 1946, p. 69.

of modifications that differentiate his version from his source of inspiration. The tale – Ovid’s or Chrétien’s version of it – tells the eponymous character’s journey from innocent and naive virgin to determined and vengeful woman. The story begins with the wedding of Philomena’s older sister Procné to Térée, king of Thrace, their return to his kingdom, and the subsequent birth of their son, Itis.¹⁵ Five years later, Térée denies Procné’s request to go see her sister, but promises to go to Athens and bring Philomena back with him. Despite embarking on this expedition with apparently good intentions, the sight of the young lady’s beauty instantly inspires love – or lust, as I will discuss later – in his heart and soon leads him to think of ways to possess her. After a long conversation, Térée finally convinces Philomena’s father to allow her to visit Procné and they sail back to Thrace. There, he takes her to an empty house outside of the city and professes his love for her, asking her to love him in return. Philomena refuses and tries to reason with him, but he ignores her pleas and rapes her. He then cuts out her tongue and imprisons her to ensure she won’t tell her story. After some time, she realizes that the old woman guarding her has all the materials needed to weave a tapestry. She has the idea to weave her story and have her guard’s daughter deliver it to her sister. Upon seeing the tapestry, Procné immediately understands and follows the messenger back to the house. She frees Philomena and the two return to the castle. Seeing the resemblance between her son and Térée, Procné decides to punish the traitor by feeding him the cooked flesh of his dead child. When he understands what they have done, Térée grabs a sword and runs after the sisters. The story ends with all three characters transforming into birds: Térée becomes a hoopoe, Procné a swallow, and Philomena a nightingale.

Amongst the cultural changes that can be read in *Philomena* we can find, for example, the transition from an oral tradition to a written one. Stories are progressively recorded in written form

¹⁵ Unless specifically discussing Ovid’s text, I will use the French spelling for the characters’ names.

instead of being transmitted orally through generations; similarly, Philomena loses her ability to speak but finds her solace in weaving, an art often used as a written mode of communication. Although this part of the story is present in both versions, Chrétien describes in much more detail. Ovid simply says that Philomela uses white and red threads to narrate her story without mentioning any specific elements she includes in her tapestry:

Sur un métier barbare elle prend un fil blanc,
L'entrecroisant de pourpre y dessine des lettres
Narrant le crime.¹⁶

(She hangs a Thracian web on her loom, and skillfully weaving purple signs on a white background, she thus tells the story of her wrongs)

By contrast, the 12th-century Philomena weaves every step of her misfortunes, from the moment Térée came to get her to the house in which she's kept as a prisoner:

Elle [la vieille] lui procura tout son matériel, tant et si bien qu'elle eut du fil en quantité, violet et vermeil, et jaune, et vert ; mais elle ne savait rien de ce que Philomena tissait ; cependant l'ouvrage lui plaisait beaucoup, qui était très difficile à faire, car à l'une des extrémités il était tissé que Philomena l'avait faite. Ensuite, on y voyait représentée la nef sur laquelle Térée avait passé la mer, quand il était allé la chercher à Athènes, et puis comment il l'avait emmenée, et comment il l'avait violée, et comment il l'avait laissée, après lui avoir tranché la langue. Elle a tout écrit sur le drap, y compris la maison et le bois où elle est emprisonnée.¹⁷

(She immediately finds tools for her, so that she has a quantity of blue-back, scarlet, yellow, and green thread. But the woman does not understand or know anything about what the maiden was embroidering, though the worked pleases her. It was very hard to do, for Philomena embroidered at one end what had happened to her. There was portrayed the ship, the one in which Tereus crossed the sea and came for her to Athens, then how he behaved when he reached Athens, how he took her away, and then forced her, and how, after cutting out her tongue, he left her. She worked it all on the tapestry, including the house where she was imprisoned)

¹⁶ Ovide, *Les Métamorphoses*, translated and edited by Georges Lafaye and Oliviers Sers, Les Belles Lettres, 2009, pp. 278-279. English translation by Frank Justus Miller.

¹⁷ Chrétien de Troyes, *Oeuvres complètes*, p. 944. English translation by Raymond Cormier.

This lengthy account of Philomena's work is another marker of Chrétien's time. As we see throughout his romances as well as in the works of the same period, it was common to find detailed descriptions that allowed authors to evoke specific images in their readers' mind.

The question of religion is another example of this cultural modernization, as we observe a switch from a pagan rhetoric to a Christian way of thinking. After Tereus reveals his true intentions and takes from her what he wants, Ovid's Philomela calls upon her father, her sister and the great gods and mentions violated marriage laws. By contrast, before Térée rapes her, Chrétien's Philomena raises the questions of honor and faith, and enjoins her attacker to repent: "Repens-toi, tu agiras sagement, tant que tu en as encore le loisir, sans te parjurer et trahir ta foi." (Repent now, that is the wisest course, as long as repentance remains possible, without perjury or fraud).¹⁸ Whereas the former calls upon a multitude of unnamed gods, the latter makes a reference to repentance, a staple of the Christian religion.

Chrétien's work with *Philomena* goes beyond the transformation of literature: by adapting this specific text into the common era he also changed portrayals of female characters in fiction. For example, we can see that Chrétien's description of the eponymous character is indeed very different from Ovid's and indicates to the educated reader that it was written in a time when what we know as courtly love was a current topic in literature. There are indeed various clues in both texts that indicate the times in which they were written. As Philomela enters to greet Tereus, Ovid describes her in four lines:

Philomèle apparaît, splendidement vêtue
Et plus belle encore, telles seraient sans doute
Parcourant leurs forêts naïades et dryades
Si leur étaient offerts mêmes riches atours.¹⁹

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 937.

¹⁹ Ovide, *Les Métamorphoses*, pp. 271-273.

(Philomela entered, attired in rich apparel, but richer still in beauty; such as we are wont to hear the naiads described, and dryads when they move about in the deep woods, if only one should give to them refinement and apparel like hers.)

This depiction, albeit short, serves its purpose – it announces that the young lady is exceptionally beautiful – and refers to images common for his time – in Greek mythology, naiads and dryads are nymphs respectively representing the water and the forest, and are commonly used as metaphors for beautiful female characters.

In his translation, Chrétien introduces Philomena in sixty lines and follows the 12th-century technique of portraying a lady.²⁰ He, too, describes her exceptional beauty in many details (her hair, facial features, body) to such an extent that, according to him, “Dieu l’avait ainsi faite que Nature, à mon avis, n’aurait rien trouvé à améliorer, si elle avait voulu la reproduire” (God had made Philomena in such a way that even Nature would indeed fail if she wished to improve upon this maiden). Chrétien, however, does not limit his portrayal to her appearance but also details the attributes of her personality, praising a lady’s intelligence and talents, as these had become an indispensable part of the romance genre’s rhetoric

Et en plus de sa grande beauté, elle savait tout ce que doit savoir une jeune fille: elle n’était pas moins sage que belle, pour dire la vérité.²¹

(Besides her great beauty, Philomena was knowledgeable in all that a young woman should know: she was no less wise than beautiful, if the truth be told.)

He then lists all her qualities: mastery of games, knowledge about birds, talent for weaving, painting and music, command of language and rhetoric. In addition, she is portrayed as an attentive and obedient daughter, being the sole caretaker for her father – all tropes for ideal womanhood in

²⁰ This aspect of the text has been discussed and often used as an argument in favor of Chrétien’s authorship: “Others concede that the work may well be Chrétien’s, but that it is a work of juvenilia, penned by a brilliant pupil who applied rhetorical principles at times too diligently.” Roberta L. Krueger, “*Philomena*: Brutal Transitions and Courtly Transformations in Chrétien’s Old French Translation” p. 88.

²¹ Chrétien de Troyes, *Oeuvres complètes*, p. 921.

medieval literature. Thus, in the eye of the medieval reader, Philomena begins her journey as a model young lady, which accentuates even more the drastic change in her personality and actions at the end of the story, after she starts showing her agency. It can also be argued, however, that all of Philomena's courtly attributes predispose her to develop agency, as she is portrayed as an intelligent and talented woman.

The story of Philomena finds its place in this dissertation because it is a prime illustration of my argument. As I will demonstrate, *Philomena* displays a representation of female agency in medieval French literature that is atypical for works of the 12th century. As stated in the introduction, I contend that female agency in my corpus arises as a result of trauma; and I define agency as the ability to act on one's own behalf and to have a sense of control over one's action, while I understand trauma as a situation of severe upset resulting from physical or emotional injury. In this regard, both criteria are met: Philomena suffers from both types of injuries, as she is raped and mutilated but also has to live with feelings of betrayal, being deceived by Térée and feeling guilty towards her sister. Her trauma is what fuels the development of her agency: as she realizes that no one is coming to save her, she devises a plan to save herself by weaving and contacting her sister. In doing so, she takes control of her own actions and distances herself from her life of silent obedience. Procné also exemplifies the development of agency as, upon "reading" her sister's story, she begins making decisions for herself without asking for her husband's approval, leaving the castle in secret and smuggling Philomena in the castle before they exact their revenge on the traitor. It is also noteworthy that although the scholarship on this text has grown since Gaston Paris "discovered" it, the theme of agency has not been the central subject of any study of *Philomena*. Indeed, many scholars have focused on the question of Chrétien's authorship, as well as the differences between Ovid's Latin version and this 12th-century translation (Elisabeth Schulze-

Busacker, Sylvia Roustant, Wagih Azzam, to cite only a few). Some studied the relation between love and sexual violence or analyzed the moral aspect of the characters' actions (such as Roberta Krueger, Michèle Gally or Dietmar Rieger). Another topic has been the creation of the female body in relation to the female characters' ability to communicate (Jane Burns for example).

Considering that the theme of rape is central to the story of *Philomena*, I deem it essential to take a look at the legal and social status of rape in society leading up to the 12th century and in Chrétien's time before analyzing the text itself in order to understand how a medieval reader could have interpreted the tale as well as how it can differ from the accepted norm. "Of all the crimes perpetrated against women, rape stands out for the ineffectiveness of the law."²² This observation by Trevor Dean summarizes the role of law in the Middle Ages – and earlier – in dealing with sexual violence. We know, for instance, that "Roman and Hebrew law sought to distinguish between cases where a girl could have avoided rape by crying for help without risking her life, and those where she could not be expected to save herself. In the latter case, she was seen as an innocent victim and not punished; in the former, she could be executed."²³ The main consequence of such a crime was the shame brought on the victim and her family, the emphasis being on restoring the family's honor more than on punishing the perpetrator. While this is a reference to pre-Christian cultures, the treatment of rape by society did not evolve much after the rise of Christianity, and shame still played a big role in determining the outcome of debates around sexual assault.

The first observation that can be made about the status of rape in French medieval society is the absence of a single word that specifically encompasses the act as we recognize it today. Kathryn Gravdal discusses this linguistic issue in its relation to gender roles: "Is it possible that

²² Trevor Dean, *Crime in medieval Europe, 1200-1550*, p. 82.

²³ Anderson, Bonnie S., and Judith P. Zinsser. *A History of Their Own: Women in Europe from Prehistory to the Present, Volume I*. Harper & Row, 1988, p. 34.

Old French is a language of men? In Old French there is no word that corresponds to the modern French *viol* to designate rape. Medieval culture does not search to find one term to denote forced coitus.”²⁴ She goes on to clarify that Old French used a variety of periphrastic expressions to convey the idea of sexual assault, the most common being *fame esforcer* (with different orthographic variants), which means “to force a woman.” Gravdal explains the various meanings of the word *esforcer* and its connotations: its etymology links it first with military or chivalrous heroism, before it evolves into a definition closer to that of rape today.

By the end of the twelfth century, the adjective ‘esforcible’ signifies valiant, formidable, powerful. Within the chivalric rubric of admirable strength and heroic efforts appears, also in the late twelfth century, the word *esforcement*, denoting effort, power, military force, bravura, and rape. From the notion of strength, manliness, and bravery, we move to the knight’s striving after heroism, and then to the idea of forced coitus.²⁵

A similar shift happened with the Latin *rapere* as it was developed in Old French, first meaning to snatch, then to hurry or hasten, later to rob or plunder, and finally to abduct a virgin. This transformation gave the words *ravir* and *ravissant* in Old French, which came to mean to carry off by force or at great speed and, as early as 1155, included a sexual connotation and designated “abduction by violence or by seduction, for the purpose of forced coitus.”²⁶ The term evolved again in the 13th and 14th centuries, shifting away from sexual violence to a religious and spiritual meaning associated with a soul being transported to heaven or by enthusiasm and joy.

In his version of Ovid’s tale, approximatively dated between 1165 and 1170, Chrétien uses such words to describe Térée’s act: “Si l’esforce tant et joustise/ Que tout a force l’a conquise/ Et trestout son bon en a fet.” Translated to modern French, this gives us “il l’a tant malmenée et attaquée qu’il l’a conquise de force, et en a fait sa volonté.” (he forces and dominates her to the

²⁴ Kathryn Gravdal, *Ravishing Maidens: Writing Rape in Medieval French Literature and Law*, p. 2.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

point of brutally exhausting her, and he takes all his pleasure from her).²⁷ The lexicon chosen by the author demonstrates the absence of a single word for the modern definition of rape and the subsequent need to paraphrase the idea. Although lengthy, the result nevertheless clearly conveys the idea of *viol* all the while leaving the reader to imagine the details of the action.

Beyond the linguistic issue, 12th-century French society had a very different – and specific – legal language to discuss and frame the notion of rape. Gratian, a canonist and jurist originally from Bologna, is credited with novel church policies on sexual violence. In his *Decretum* (ca. 1140), a collection of canon laws, he sought to redefine the crime as well as its penalties. Gravdal specifies that in his work he makes “an appeal to the courts for the tempering of rape prosecution, in the name of Christian love. In obedience to the tradition that the church should not shed blood, he rejects the death penalty for ravishment.”²⁸ He advises, instead, that a man guilty of *raptus* should be punished by excommunication, often for a year or two. His new definition of rape considerably reduces the possibilities for women to seek justice, as it includes precise requirements for an act to be considered punishable sexual violence:

- 1) unlawful coitus must be completed;
- 2) the victim must be abducted from the house of her father;
- 3) the abduction and coitus must be accomplished by violence;
- 4) a marriage agreement must not have been negotiated previously between the victim and the ravisher.²⁹

Such criteria show that the law during Chrétien’s time was more concerned with male rights – in this case the father’s rights – than with protection of women. Although Gratian’s *Decretum* did not provide the only definition of rape in the Middle Ages, it is safe to assume that, more often than not, the female victim had little recourse and seeking justice was rarely a viable option.

²⁷ Chrétien de Troyes, *Philomena*, in *Oeuvres complètes*, p. 937.

²⁸ Kathryn Gravdal, “Chrétien de Troyes, Gratian, and the Medieval Romance of Sexual Violence,” p. 567.

²⁹ Ibid.

Frequently, the situation could simply be resolved by marriage between the raptor and his victim, as there was little hope of making a good marriage given the dishonor brought to the woman and her family, and “the court encouraged these unions by pardoning the rapist if he married his victims.”³⁰

In this legal and social climate, Chrétien chose to write his version of Ovid’s tale, leaving his readers to interpret and judge Térée’s actions based on their knowledge of the law and their experience of its application in everyday life. Literary representations of rape sometimes differ greatly from the confines of laws we can historically verify in documents such as Gratian’s. Chrétien himself invented his own rape laws and customs, in his romances typically focusing on the male characters either in order for them to prove their worth and honor or to highlight the assailant’s poor morals through eccentric and bizarre punishments. In *Perceval*, for instance, Gauvain sentences a man guilty of raping a virgin to eat with dogs with his hands tied behind his back for a month. The hero feels justified in administering such a punishment because

sur la terre du roi Arthur les jeunes filles sont protégées. Le roi a arrêté pour elles des mesures de sauvegarde et de sauf-conduit, et je ne peux pas croire que pour ce mauvais traitement tu puisses me haïr, ou pour cela même me faire du mal, car j’ai agi dans le cadre de la justice qui est établie avec force de loi sur tout le territoire royal.³¹

(in King Arthur’s land the safety of the maidens is guaranteed, the king having assured them of safe conduct and thus protection in his charge. I don’t think it credible that you hate me for this ‘misdeed’ or seek my harm on account of that, since I did it in the exercise of rightful justice as established and maintained throughout the king’s land.)

Here, Chrétien’s creation is a suspension of the privilege of raping women throughout King Arthur’s land and a guarantee of safety for them. While at first this seems like a harsh condemnation of rape from the author, it is not actually such a big departure from what the readers may have expected as the extravagance of the punishment highlights the culprit’s plight instead of

³⁰ Shulamith Shahar, *The Fourth Estate: A History of Women in the Middle Ages*, p. 16.

³¹ Chrétien de Troyes, *Perceval ou le Conte du Graal*, in *Oeuvres complètes*, p. 860.

the female victim's suffering. We find another peculiar representation of rape in Chrétien's work in the Lovesome Damsel episode in *Lancelot*. After the lady fakes sexual assault to draw Lancelot's attention, she shares with him the law of her country:

En ce temps-là les us et coutumes voulaient qu'un chevalier, s'il rencontrait seule une demoiselle ou jeune fille, se sentît obligé, autant que de ne pas se trancher la gorge, de lui témoigner un strict respect, s'il voulait garder sa bonne réputation; mais s'il lui faisait violence, alors il était à jamais discrédité, banni de toutes les cours. Mais si elle était escortée par un autre chevalier, on pouvait si l'on voulait la lui disputer et la conquérir par les armes, et ensuite faire ce que l'on voulait sans encourir honte ni blame.³²

(At that period the customs and rights decreed that a knight, finding a damsel or girl alone, if he wished to keep his good reputation, would no more treat her with less than total honor than he would cut his own throat; and should he rape her, he would be disgraced for ever in all courts. But if she had an escort, then another person wishing to fight a combat with him for her and win her by force of arms would be able to have his will of her without incurring any shame or reproach.)

Here once again Chrétien seems at first to be ensuring women's safety but creates a law that is really concerned with the knights' reputation and honor more than anything else. The law in *Lancelot* focuses on the male's range of actions, to the extent that it provides them with a context for justifiable rape.

Philomena is inherently different from Chrétien's romances because the story does not take place in a familiar medieval setting like King Arthur's kingdom for example, but instead is set in Athens and Thrace, geographical markers of Antiquity.³³ Having a setting so far removed from 12th-century sociocultural norms allowed Chrétien to create another set of rules around the issue of rape. Indeed, while Ovid's tale did not include a legal discussion, the medieval author invents a religion-based justification for Térée's actions. Once the Thracian has fallen in love upon seeing Philomela, the Latin poet describes the character's growing desire and his plans to possess her:

Térée flambe d'un coup à la vue de la vierge
Comme s'embrase un feu soudain de vieille paille

³² Chrétien de Troyes, *Lancelot ou le Chevalier de la Charrette*, in *Oeuvres complètes*, p. 539.

³³ Except for *Cligès* which is also set in an earlier time period.

Ou sur un tas de foin feuille et herbe mêlées.
 Elle est belle, il est vrai, mais son désir s'excite
 De la lubricité naturelle à son peuple :
 Brûlé du vice thrace il flambe ainsi deux fois
 Et n'a plus qu'une idée : détourner ses compagnes,
 Corrompre sa nourrice, ou séduire la vierge
 Par de riches cadeaux, fut-ce au prix d'un royaume,
 Ou l'enlever et guerroyer pour la garder.
 Son amour effréné et prêt à tout oser.³⁴

(The moment he saw the maiden Tereus was inflamed with love, quick as if one should set fire to ripe grain, or dry leaves, or hay stored away in the mow. Her beauty, indeed, was worth it; but in his case his own passionate nature pricked him on, and, besides, the men of his clime are quick to love: his own fire and his nation's burnt in him. His impulse was to corrupt her attendants' care and her nurse's faithfulness, and even by rich gifts to tempt the girl herself, even at the cost of all his kingdom; or else to ravish her and to defend his act by bloody war.)

The focus here is placed on the natural disposition of Térée as a Thracian, who like his countrymen, is overtaken by desire and willingness to satisfy it by any means.

Chrétien, on the other hand, immediately passes a moral judgment on Térée's feelings and counterbalances it with a fictitious law. After Philomena enters the room and the author finishes her portrait, Térée greets her and is instantaneously taken by the young lady's charms:

Sa grande beauté lui prend son Coeur, ainsi que sa belle contenance ; Péché lui fait espérer félonie et folie, Amour le tient vilainement. – Vilainement ? – Oui, sans aucun doute : il s'engage dans la voie de la vilenie, quand il met son coeur à aimer la soeur de sa femme. Pour autant, même si elle était sa propre soeur, l'amour qu'il éprouvait n'était pas vil, car un des dieux qu'ils honoraient selon leur loi avait établi qu'ils devaient tous faire leur volonté et leur plaisir. Telle était la loi qu'il leur avait donnée par écrit : chacun pouvait faire sans crime ce qu'il voulait et ce qui lui plaisait.³⁵

(Philomena's dazzling beauty seizes his heart. Pitifully he has evil and foolish desires. Wile, churlish love now binds him. Vile? Yes, for sure. Love torments him with vileness, for it wishes to make his heart love his wife's sister. (Now if she were his own sister it would not be illicit, because one of the gods they had established that they could do anything they wanted or pleased. Such a law had this god written for them that one could do whatever please or delighted, without offense.)

³⁴ Ovide, *Philomela*, in *Les Métamorphoses*, p. 273.

³⁵ Chrétien de Troyes, *Philomena*, in *Oeuvres complètes*, p. 922.

Chrétien departs from his source by providing his audience with a form of justification for the crime, postponing the discussion of Térée's scheming to a later scene. Although this pagan law is vastly different from Gratian's definition of rape or from Chrétien's imaginary laws in *Perceval* and *Lancelot*, it once again emphasizes the male character's predicament and ignores the victim's future pain. In phrasing Térée's reasoning using the lexicons of law and pleasure, he reframes the issue by focusing on male rights, and specifically the right to pleasure. Consequently, while the medieval reader may consider this unnamed pagan god's law far-fetched, its result, if called upon to defend the crime, closely resembles what they might experience in their time, that is to say minimal punishment – if any – for the perpetrator and quick dismissal of the victim's suffering.

Whereas the story can be interpreted as a traditional representation of gender roles and of the poor treatment of women, I argue that *Philomena* differs from other texts by providing a situation for the female character to transcend expectations and experiment with a new path of action. In the romances, rape and ravishment are tools for the author to advance the story while performing one of five social functions, which can be interpreted as lessons for the reader.

In Chrétien's romances, rape and ravishment function in five principal ways. First, as a chivalric test, they constitute a trope for military prowess. The test can take the form of a combat with a would-be attacker, the punishment of a rapist, or the rescue of a victim: all count as testimonies to a knight's mettle. Second, as an ethical test, rape offers a moral challenge. Because Arthur's knights are charged with the protection of helpless damsels, a knight may face a difficult choice between two conflicting duties, but he must always give priority to his ethical responsibility to ladies in distress. Third, as a social marker, rape distinguishes the nobility from the other classes: most of Chrétien's would-be rapists are of inferior social origin, while all female victims of assault or abduction are of noble birth. Fourth, the motif or *raptus* frequently encodes a patriotic message: a noblewoman is abducted as a test of one kingdom's strength. Through this sentimentalized adventure of kidnapping, the audience learns a lesson in political hegemony. Finally, rape or *raptus* can be roped as an aesthetic marker of and testimony to physical beauty. In a violent twist, the heroine is subjected to the threat of assault in poetic demonstration of her attractiveness.³⁶

³⁶ Kathryn Gravdal, *Ravishing Maidens*, p. 44.

These depictions all conform to the commonly accepted criteria of courtly romance and to the standard style of writing romances. In *Cligès*, for instance, the eponymous hero fulfills several of these tests: he proves his worth as a knight as he rescues the beautiful Fénice in the name of his uncle the emperor, after she was abducted by the leader of another kingdom.

In *Philomena*, although Chrétien follows the literary tropes of courtly love,³⁷ the rape scene does not seem to serve any of these functions and is portrayed more clearly than in the other texts. I contend that this dissonance is proof that Chrétien used *Philomena* to experiment with writing, to create this exceptional situation. If his portrayal of sexual violence here is different from the traditional representation, then we can assume the affected character to be equally different from the characters in traditional situations. Rape here does not fulfill the five functions, except for one:

- 1) there is no chivalric test: Térée is not a knight;
- 2) there is no ethical test: Térée never questions the moral aspect of his actions;
- 3) there are no social markers distinguishing the assailant from his victim: both Térée and Philomena are part of a noble class;
- 4) the story does not offer a patriotic message: the rape does not lead to any conflict between nations;
- 5) there is, however, an aesthetic marker: Philomena is so beautiful and attractive that Térée simply can't resist her.

Whereas these functions typically serve a “male” purpose, here Philomena's beauty triggers, admittedly in a perverse way, her journey to emancipation. Furthermore, Philomena's exceptionalism stems not only from her physical beauty, but also from the richness of her personality. Chrétien makes a portrait of her, we saw, that goes beyond her appearance and lists her numerous skills: she is wise, knows various games and other forms of entertainment, has an extensive knowledge of birds, is an exceptional embroiderer and a talented painter, is well versed in grammar and literature, is gifted in lyricism and plays multiple musical instruments, and can

³⁷ These tropes will be discussed later.

speak so well she could open a school to teach the art of speech.³⁸ With such a complete description, Chrétien shifts the attention from her physical attributes to her knowledge and practical skills. I argue that, while initially she would appear to be a model young lady in the eye of the medieval reader, these attributes portraying her as an intelligent and talented woman are early signs that predispose Philomena to develop agency.

The structure of Chrétien's text itself, when analyzed closely, provides a hint at a shift in Philomena's part in the tale. The rape scene is a pivotal moment not only because of its importance in the narrative, but also because it takes place approximately between verses 738 and 860, that is to say right after the halfway point. In this regard, Chrétien mirrored his source: while the Latin text is much shorter than the Old French one (250 verses against 1468), Ovid also placed the rape scene approximately at the center of the story (between verses 524 and 563).³⁹ The place of the rape in the story matters especially in relation to the number of times Chrétien uses the heroine's name: "Philomena" appears a total of twenty times, six before and fourteen after the traumatic event. I believe this shift is noteworthy as it coincides with the portrayal of Philomena's exploration of her agency. In the first half of the story, she is mentioned only in passing or as the object of someone else's desire:

- v. 4: she is introduced as one of Pandion's daughters
- v. 52: Procné longs to see her sister
- v. 108: Térée tells Pandion he traveled to Athens because of his wife's wish to see her sister
- v. 125: Chrétien portrays the heroine
- v. 237: Térée's mission to bring Philomena to Procné is the source of his misfortunes
- v. 729: she doesn't know it, but she is already in danger, about to be led by Térée to his deserted house

³⁸ Chrétien de Troyes, *Philomena*, in *Oeuvres complètes*, pp. 921-922.

³⁹ I consider the rape scene to begin when Térée starts leading Philomena to his secluded house and ends when he leaves her there, after cutting off her tongue and imprisoning her.

While Philomena is not completely silenced (she has a conversation with Térée about whether her father will allow her to leave or not), this accentuates the fact that she is predominantly depicted as a passive character before she is assaulted and imprisoned. She appears as the object of Térée's desire as well as the object of Pandion's happiness and becomes the object of their negotiations as the two men discuss the possibility of Philomena sailing to see her sister. The number of times her name is used in the second half of the tale increases and attests to her new role in the narrative: for example, her name is used five times between verse 1244 and verse 1229 while she devises, then carries out, her escape plan. Other uses of her name are related to her and Procné's reunion and revenge, to her impact on Térée's life or indicate the end of the story. In this regard, Chrétien simply expanded on Ovid's work: Philomela is mentioned by name ten times in the original text, five before the rape and five after. Out of these ten mentions, only the final two are active actions carried out by the protagonist, and both have to do with the violence at the end of the tale (she slits Itys's throat, and a little later she throws his head at Térée). Ovid, therefore, also showed that his character had been transformed after surviving her trauma, even if to a lesser extent than the French author later represented.

Both Chrétien's portrait of the eponymous character and the structure of the text are clues to Philomena's evolution. The author portrays female agency as the result of the traumatic experience, as a manifestation of a survival instinct: after she is raped, mutilated, and imprisoned, Philomena is forced to assess her situation (her current predicament as well as her position in life in general) and realizes that she must take action herself if she wishes to overcome Térée's violent effect on her life. The first sign that Chrétien gives the reader about his heroine's upcoming development is that she contemplates escaping almost immediately after Térée left her under watch of her guard. While Procné believes her sister dead and performs funeral rites, Philomena thinks

about the fact that she could use help, including Procné's, but comes to the conclusion that even if she did have assistance, she wouldn't be able to communicate with her rescuers, as she has lost the ability to speak:

Elle aurait eu bien besoin d'aide, et elle aurait bien voulu, si cela avait été possible, que sa soeur sache dans quel état elle se trouvait ; mais elle ne savait quelle ruse inventer pour le lui faire savoir, car elle n'a pas de messenger qui puisse aller la trouver, et la parole lui manque – même si elle avait le messenger, elle ne pourrait en aucune manière manifester ni exprimer ses sentiments.⁴⁰

(She needed help and, if she could find a way, she would like her sister to know of her condition. But she knew not how to devise a truck by which to send for her, because she had no messenger to send. And even if she had one, speech was impossible, for she could not reveal or speak her mind in any way.)

Here we see that she clearly recognizes that she cannot expect to be saved, as no one is aware of her situation and she has no readily available manner of contacting her sister. Additionally, her guard has strict orders to keep her inside and watches her constantly, preventing her from fleeing her prison. She stays in the house for such a long period of time, however, that eventually she thinks of a strategy out of necessity:

Elle resta longtemps dans cette situation, tant qu'à la fin il lui vint à l'esprit, *sous la pression de nécessité*, que dans la maison il y avait des fuseaux [...] ; elle a alors conçu un plan grâce auquel elle pense pouvoir garantir que sa soeur sera mise au courant de sa mésaventure.⁴¹

(She stayed there for a long time, until, finally, she reflected and realized at this time of need that she had been sewing in this house [...] She decided to make something by means of which she could be assured that her whole misfortune would be revealed to her sister.)

In showing how Philomena finds a solution to her problem, Chrétien illustrates that she has a unique ability to analyze a situation. However, that aptitude is unlocked "sous la pression de nécessité," that is to say when all other possibilities have been exhausted. While it is most certainly

⁴⁰ *Philomena*, p. 943.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 943-944, my emphasis.

problematic that she has to be in a dire situation to access all of her potential, as Chrétien depicts her, Philomena is a resourceful female character. By assessing her surroundings, she is able to devise a plan that combines the available resources and her own skills in order to achieve her goal.

It is in that precise moment, I argue, that Philomena discovers her agency: her actions from that point and until the end of the tale are her own. Whereas before she personified traditional femininity as she served and obeyed her father, she now acts in pursuit of her personal motives: to escape her prison and rejoin her sister to share her story. I will add that, unbeknownst to him, Térée creates an ideal setting for Philomena's change of character. As Vicki Mistacco, remarks "Philomèle parvient à convertir sa prison, bergerie isolée au milieu d'une forêt, en une 'chambre à soi' (Virginia Woolf), lieu d'une production artistique par laquelle elle recouvre la voix et recrée sa capacité de communiquer." (Philomela succeeds in converting her jail, an isolated sheep pen in the middle of a forest, into a "room of her own" (Virginia Woolf), place of an artistic production through which she recovers her voice and recreates her capacity to communicate).⁴² Although she discusses Ovid's version of the tale, her comment applies equally to Chrétien's retelling. It is important to note, however, that Philomena is not only isolated in the woods, but that Térée has chosen women to be her guards. As Chrétien points out through a narratorial comment:

Mais Térée commit une faute, en mettant avec Philomena, pour la garder, une paysanne qui vivait de son travail, car elle savait tisser et filer ; et elle avait une fille à qui elle apprenait son métier."⁴³

(And yet, Tereus committed folly by placing a peasant-woman there to guard Philomena; for the woman was self-supporting, knew how to sew and weave, and a daughter of hers was there to whom she was teaching her craft.)

⁴² Mistacco, p. 13.

⁴³ *Philomena*, p. 938.

In doing so, Térée provides Philomena with the tools to escape and shows a narrow, misogynistic understanding of women's abilities. Because she has lost her voice, he fails to imagine not only that she might possess alternative skills of communication, but also that these skills are shared amongst women and might serve to save her.⁴⁴

The tapestry as a text represents this pivotal moment in Philomena's life. In *The Pleasure of the Text*, Barthes gives a definition of the *text* that can help understand its importance:

Text means *Tissue*; but whereas hitherto we have always taken this tissue as a product, a ready-made veil behind which lies, more or less hidden, meaning (truth), we are now emphasizing, in the tissue, the generative idea that the text is made, is worked out in a perpetual interweaving; lost in this tissue – this texture – the subject unmakes himself, like a spider dissolving in the constructive secretions of its web.⁴⁵

Reading Philomena's tapestry in this light, we can see how crucial this work is in her path to agency. Through the physical act of weaving her story, she unmakes herself: she is at the same time taking control of her own narrative and unmaking the passive version of herself – the version that is an object for other's pleasure (Térée or her father) – and makes the new version of herself that acts independently and controls her choices. Furthermore, just as Barthes talks about the text or tissue as a veil hiding meaning or truth, Philomena's tapestry hides and reveals the truth of her fate and the truth of Térée's lies and crimes. On one hand, truth is hidden as not all who see it are able to understand its meaning (the guard and her daughter are unable to see what Philomena is doing), and on the other the true meaning of the work is revealed when read by its intended audience (Procné immediately understands her sister's messages when she sees the tapestry). Philomena's weaving, then, is the physical (or visual) representation of her emotional

⁴⁴ Burns, pp. 131-132.

⁴⁵ Barthes, p. 64. I first read this definition in Nancy Miller's "Arachnologies" (*Subject to Change, Reading Feminist Writing*, Columbia University Press, 1988, p. 79).

transformation and proof that she overcomes Térée's mutilation by appropriating her body and using her innate skills to develop a new form of communication.

Scholars have analyzed the siblings' link and pointed out parallels between Philomena and Procné. For instance, Mark Amsler observed that the latter's reaction when receiving the tapestry mimics her sister's tragic condition: "When she reads the unglossed text composed by Philomela, Progne becomes mute [...] Recalling Ovid's version, Progne's voiceless response to Philomela's text empathetically identifies Progne with her violated and lacerated sister."⁴⁶ Upon learning about her sister's rape and mutilation, Procné metaphorically loses her voice, joining Philomena in her pain. Karen Casebier adds that, in Chrétien's version, the sisters display the same attitude when serving Térée his meal: whereas in Ovid's tale Progne is portrayed as a madwoman, in the medieval tale her "preconceived actions prompt the reader to view her as a cold and methodical criminal." Similarly, "when Procne finally reveals the truth and Tereus comprehends that the appetizing dish he has just consumed was actually his only son, Philomena now reveals herself to Tereus and throws Itys' gory head at him." While Ovid's Philomena abruptly leapt out of hiding tossed the severed head, Chrétien's character was "calmly waiting for her sister's signal in an adjoining room."⁴⁷ Casebier here emphasizes the sisters' shared stoicism when committing crime, prompted by the atrocity of Térée's previous actions.

I would like, however, to take the sisters' relationship further by positing that the former's display of agency effectively triggers the latter's discovery of her own. Indeed, as Procné sees – reads – her sister's fate and understands her husband's treachery and crime, her immediate reaction contradicts her behavior so far. Until she receives the tapestry, Procné is portrayed as an example

⁴⁶ Amsler p. 89.

⁴⁷ Casebier, pp. 455-456.

of female passivity: she marries Térée on her father's order, she gives birth to a son,⁴⁸ she obeys when her husband forbids her to travel to see her sister. I contend that the shocking news of her sister's experience, however, is a trauma itself for Procné, who instantly begins to act in her own name, conscious of the consequences of her decisions:

alors elle [la jeune fille] lui a offert la courtine, et la reine l'a déployée, elle la regarde et elle comprend l'ouvrage, mais elle ne révèle pas ses pensées, en femme qui ne veut pas crier ni faire de scandale ; simplement elle lui commande de s'en aller. La jeune fille s'en va, et la reine la suit, ni de trop loin ni de trop près, de manière à ne jamais la perdre de vue.⁴⁹

([she] offers her the tapestry; the queen opens it and looks and comprehends the work, but she does not reveal her thoughts, for she wishes not to cry out nor to make a commotion. Rather she orders the servant to leave. She does and the queen goes right after her, following her at a safe distance, so that she never loses sight of her.)

As Chrétien specifies that Procné takes care to not create a scandal as well as not to lose sight of the young girl she is following, I interpret these precautions as signs that she is in complete control of her actions: while in the past she asked Térée for permission when she wanted something, here she not only acts without speaking to him first but also ensures that she remains unseen so as not to be stopped. Procné, just like Philomena, experiences a traumatic moment, albeit emotional and not physical, that pushes her to remake herself into an independent woman.

I would also argue that Procné's initial demonstration of her newfound agency is significant as it contradicts Térée's actions. She not only acts without discussing her intentions with him, but she also undoes his crime as she arrives at the secret house. First, she frees her sister in a violent manner, mirroring his assault on Philomena:

Procné, comme folle, arrive à la porte, et la trouve close. Elle n'a pas dit un mot, elle n'a pas appelé, elle la frappe du pied aussi fort qu'elle peut, et la paysanne ne bouge pas, mais se tait et fait la sourde. Philomena se met à crier et court ouvrir la porte à sa soeur ; la

⁴⁸ While she has no control over the gender of her child, I understand her having a son as a continuation of her display of traditional female roles.

⁴⁹ *Philomena*, p. 947.

vieille, qui tremble de peur, court la retenir, et Procné frappe et heurte et donne de grands coups, tant qu'elle l'emporte et brise la porte.⁵⁰

(and now Procné like a madwoman comes to the door that she finds bolted. She does not speak or call out, but just kicks at it as hard as she can, and the peasant woman sits perfectly still, speechless, and quiet. Philomena cries out and rushes to open the door for her sister. The peasant woman, trembling all over in fear, runs over to hold her back, but Procné is striking and kicking, so that the door is unhinged and smashed in.)

Then she brings her back to Térée's castle in secret, mimicking his subterfuge when he pretended that she was dead:

Elles s'en vont alors vers la cité, sans cesser de manifester leur douleur. Elles n'empruntent ni chemins ni sentiers, et Procné l'emmène discrètement jusqu'à une chambre souterraine, pour se désoler en cachette.⁵¹

(Thereupon they go to the city, sharing their grief on the way. They do not keep to the paths or the roads, and Procné stealthily leads her down to an underground chamber where they could be sorrowful in secret.)

Procné therefore finds her agency as a result of Térée's actions and counteracts his immoral behavior by mirroring it as she liberates Philomena. Reunited, the sisters embody the consequences of Térée's wrongdoing and exemplify Chrétien's representation of female agency: only after surviving a traumatic experience can a female character be shown to transcend traditional gender roles and become autonomous.

I would like to correlate the sisters' story, in particular Philomena's, with Sara Ahmed's study of the will. In *Willful Subjects*, she posits that "a subject that is willing to obey is a subject without a will: a willing subject becomes a will-less subject."⁵² Indeed, Philomena, and by extension Procné, have no will of their own as long as they are willing to abide by society's rules

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 948.

⁵² Sara Ahmed, *Willful Subjects*, p. 66.

and expectations. It is only when they break away from what is considered the norm that they truly become willful. Ahmed also introduces the idea that the will is a project and emerges

as a sphere of gradation: the will can be stronger and weaker, healthier and unhealthier, better and worse, such that the state of the will becomes the truest measure of the state of the person. The will in this conceptual horizon is understood not as something a subject has, or experiences itself as having, but as what a subject develops, or must develop, to a greater or lesser extent, over time.⁵³

In this sense, agency in *Philomena* can be understood in terms of a project: it is not necessarily an innate quality but one that needs to be developed and defines the female characters. Until they begin exploring their agency, Philomena and Procné are portrayed as passive actors in their own lives, but as soon as they begin acting in their own names, they are shown to become progressively stronger in their decisions. Now both willful characters, the sisters are free to act in accordance with their own desires, whether those desires align with the social norms or not.

The tale, however, takes a turn for the worse and soon the sisters' actions become extremely violent as revenge becomes the center of their attention. I contend that although their behavior is widely accepted as reprehensible, their actions can nonetheless be interpreted as exploration of their agency.

As soon as they are safely arrived back at the castle, Procné's first thought is to lament her sister's condition and hope for retribution: "Ma soeur, dit-elle, je suis bien malheureuse, quand je vous retrouve en si mauvais état, et que je ne sais ni ne puis vous venger du felon qui vous a traitée ainsi. Dieu lui en donne le salaire que mérite sa félonie." ("Sister," she says, "my grieving is great on finding you so mutilated. I know not how I can take revenge for what that scoundrel did to you. May God grant him recompense to befit his wickedness.")⁵⁴ Procné's priorities have, as we see,

⁵³ Ibid., p. 61.

⁵⁴ *Philomena*, p. 948.

completely shifted as she hopes for a divine intervention to help in punishing Térée. In a terrible twist of fate, her prayer is immediately answered as her son enters the room. Unfortunately for Itys, he bears too great a physical resemblance to his father and is associated, in Procné's rage-filled mind, with Térée's crimes:

Ah ! dit-elle, toi qui ressembles au traître, au demon infâme ! Il te faut mourir de mort amère, pour la félonie de ton père. Tu paieras sa félonie. Toi qui ne l'as pas mérité, tu mourras à tout pour son forfait, car ta seule faute est que je n'ai jamais vu, et que Dieu n'a jamais créé, à mon avis, une ressemblance si manifeste, et c'est pour cette raison que je veux te décapiter.⁵⁵

("Ah," she hisses, "image of the fraud, that vile demon!" You must die a bitter death for your father's treachery and you will pay now for his wickedness. You shall die wrongly for his crime, even though you do not deserve it at all, except that, to my knowledge, never has there been nor has God ever made a more perfect resemblance to another human being. ... And for this I want to behead you.")

Procné is conscious that her son's only fault is to closely resemble his father, and for that alone he will pay for his father's heinous crime. Despite a moment of hesitation as Itys hugs her, the knowledge of Térée's abuse of Philomena inspires a rage that trumps a mother's love. She decides she will avenge her sister by beheading the child and feeding his corpse to the traitor; and so she cuts off Itys's head and hands it to Philomena.

Here is another important change made by Chrétien through his translation: whereas his Procné cuts off her own son's head, in Ovid's version of the tale the mother stabs the child, but it is Philomela who decapitates him before they prepare his flesh for cooking. Chrétien's is a significant difference as it shifts the attention from one sister to the other. I contend that by making Procné the hand of the vengeance, Chrétien emphasizes her departure from traditional gender roles as well as her transition from a passive character to an active one: her role as a sister takes precedence to her role as a wife and a mother. Although it is undeniable that her actions are

⁵⁵ Ibid. pp. 948-949.

monstrous, killing Itys is, in her mind, the only way she can avenge Philomena: “C’est ainsi qu’elle peut venger sa soeur du felon qui l’a meurtrie.” (Thus she could avenge her sister on the scoundrel who had mutilated Philomena.)⁵⁶ In her attempt to right the wrong made to her sister, and by extension to herself, she discards motherhood, an attribute she only gained by marrying Térée and now only reminds her of the horror he committed.

It is noteworthy that Chrétien used the term “afolee” and the translator chose “meurtie” as it strengthens the impact of Térée’s actions and Procné’s revenge. The verb “afole” in Old French has three definitions:

AFOLER, verbe:

- A. “Mettre quelqu’un à mal, le blesser, le mutiler”
- B. “Tuer quelqu’un”
- C. [au figuré] “Perdre quelqu’un, le ruiner, le détruire”⁵⁷

The word choice really conveys the horror of the crime: Térée physically hurts and mutilates Philomena (A), and, I would argue, metaphorically kills her by taking her virginity and her ability to speak (B). The figurative sense of the verb also applies (C), as we can see Philomena feels lost, ruined, and destroyed in the aftermath of her rape. By murdering his only son, Procné exacts a vengeance on Térée that replicates the effects suffered by Philomena. When realizing that the meal he enjoyed was his son’s flesh, he first becomes physically ill at the thought (“cela lui trouble le sang”/ inflames his blood),⁵⁸ just like his victim felt physical pain. Then, he is “rendered speechless, a physical response that evokes the post-rape mutilation of Philomena and the tapestry

⁵⁶ Ibid. p. 949.

⁵⁷ “Afole” in *DÉCT : Dictionnaire Électronique de Chrétien de Troyes*, <http://www.atilf.fr/dect>, LFA/Université d’Ottawa - ATILF - CNRS & Université de Lorraine. The specific entry can be found at this address: http://atilf.atilf.fr/scripts/dect.exe?BASE_LEXIQUE;VED=AFOLER1;SUIPRE=AFOLER1;FERMER;SANS_MENU;ISIS=isis_dect.txt;OUVRIR_MENU=3;OO1=4;OO2=-1;s=s010f2ddc;LANGUE=FR

⁵⁸ *Philomena*, p. 951.

episode in which the queen becomes paralyzed with grief and rage.”⁵⁹ Finally, in the figurative sense, Térée is also lost and ruined, for two reasons: first, because the intense shame and rage he feels prompt his transformation into a hoopoe, described by Chrétien as “ignoble, affreux, petit et vil.” (repugnant and odious, small and old).⁶⁰ This choice of bird is interesting for it is known as “a very beautiful bird” and it is said that his name is derived from his “hoop! hoop!” sound that reminds us of the dove. The hoopoe, however, also represents baseness due to his unsanitary habits because of the Old French proverb “Sale come une hoppe” (dirty like a hoopoe) and the idea that “the bird was supposed to sing *mon nid pute* (my nest smells)” as he was said to build his nest with his own excrements.⁶¹ Secondly, and more importantly in a patriarchal society, Térée is ruined because his lineage ends with Itis's death, therefore taking away his power to perpetuate imbalanced gender roles through his son.

Once Itys is dead, the sisters together make a meal out of his body, and Procné lures Térée by promising he will eat what is, in her opinion, the thing he loves the most in this world. He accepts and only requests that his son be present at the meal, to which she quickly replies that he will most definitely be there. While feasting, he repeatedly asks when Itys will arrive until Procné can no longer contain herself and tells him the truth about his meal, prompting Philomena to come out of her hiding place and to hurl the child's bloody head at him. At this sight, Térée feels shame, first because he understands what his meal was made of, but also because the sight of Philomena reminds him of his actions. This shame is short-lived, however, and quickly turns into rage as he reaches for a sword and runs after the sisters, threatening to kill them to avenge his son.

⁵⁹ Casebier, p. 455.

⁶⁰ *Philomena*, p. 952.

⁶¹ Rowland, pp. 81-82.

While their behavior is obviously criminal, the blame for the child's murder cannot be entirely placed on the sisters as it is an act of revenge prompted by years of oppression and abuse from a male-dominated society and the harsh rules imposed on women. In her analysis of the feminist film *A Question of Silence*, Sara Ahmed discusses the way an accumulation of sexist manifestations of the patriarchy pushes women to crime:

She is used to this injustice; she has come to expect it; but this time she snaps. They snap. These three women each have a hand in murdering the man with the tools that usually extend the female body: shopping trolleys, coat hangers, the high heel of a shoe. If it is an act of rage and revenge, it is directed not only against this man, but this world. It is a seemingly random act of violence, a confirmation of female madness to the eyes of the law, but the film is told from the women's point of view: and *patriarchy becomes the reason*.⁶²

While this film is a different situation, the same logic can be applied to understand Procné and Philomena's behavior. After a life of silent obedience to the men surrounding them, the violence displayed by Térée's action is what make the sisters snap. Murdering the child, cooking his flesh, and feeding it to the father may be a display of female madness in the eyes of society, but to them it is an act of revenge against the system that led to Philomena's trauma. Just like in this movie, *patriarchy becomes the reason* why Itys dies, the child becomes the unfortunate sacrifice that allows the sisters to express their rage.

In addition, the act of murdering Itys is symbolic: by killing the son and feeding his cooked flesh to the father, they end Térée's lineage and put a stop to his atrocity. Eliminating the male heir can be interpreted as a way to take control over the patriarchy, to take control of their own lives. I argue that it is another example of their agency. However reprehensible their actions, they manifest a desire to protect themselves by reproducing the only course of action they have witnessed, and

⁶² Ahmed, p. 156. Her emphasis.

that is violence displayed by men. As Térée's instinct upon understanding his son is dead is to reach for a sword and chase the sisters to kill them.

The story rapidly ends after all crimes are exposed: as they all run – in pursuit or in escape – all three protagonists transform into birds. Térée becomes a hoopoe, Procné becomes a swallow, and Philomena becomes a nightingale. Here Chrétien keeps in line with Ovid's story by choosing the hoopoe for Térée, although he modifies the description. For Ovid, the hoopoe looks like an armed bird: "Térée [...] devient oiseau aussi. Une aigrette à son front/ Dressée, au lieu d'épée un bec saillant et long,/ C'est l'oiseau nommé huppe et qu'on croirait armé." (Tereus [...] is himself changed into a bird. Upon his head a stiff crest appears, and a huge beak stands forth instead of his long sword. He is the hoopoe, with the look of one armed for war).⁶³ By contrast, Chrétien uses negative terms to describe the transformation: "Térée est devenu un oiseau, ignoble et affreux, petit et vil. L'épée lui est tombée des mains, et il est devenu une huppe coupée, selon ce que dit la fable, pour son péché et pour la honte qu'il a infligée à la jeune fille." (Tereus was transformed into a bird, repugnant and odious, small and old. From his hand the sword fell, and he became, just as the fable recounts, a pierced hoopoe – because of his shameful sin with the maiden).⁶⁴ In doing so, Chrétien inserts a moral judgement of Térée's actions and seemingly condemns him by describing his avian avatar with negative language.

Chrétien also expands on Ovid's original text by specifying what kind of birds the sisters turn into, whereas the Latin author simply tells his readers they fly away. While both the swallow and the nightingale symbolize various ideas, the fact that Philomena becomes a nightingale is especially significant. As Beryl Rowland explains:

as a symbol, the nightingale is complex. The love with which it is traditionally identified may be unhappy or happy. Associated with the ancient story of rape and revenge, the bird

⁶³Ovid, *Philomela*, p. 285.

⁶⁴ *Philomena*, p. 952.

sings a lament; associated with the spring and the May morning, the nightingale sings simply of happy love; associated with the poet, it can express either personal ecstasy or pain; in a further meaning, exclusive to the Middle Ages and directly opposed to the secular interpretation already illustrated, the nightingale sings of Christ's death and resurrection and is itself the symbol of the greatest love.⁶⁵

Philomena is surrounded by both happy and unhappy love: her father and her sister represent happiness, as they seek to protect her, yet she is unhappy because of her rape and loss of voice, caused by Térée's violent lust which he thinks is love. As the story ends, I argue that Philomena manifests all different facets of the nightingale mentioned by Rowland. On the one hand, her final words according to Chrétien are a form of lament: "Oci ! Oci !", or "Tue ! Tue" (Kill! Kill!)⁶⁶ is a warning to all those who betray and harm young women. On the other hand, this threat also shows Philomena's new role; in a sense, she is resurrected as a protector – and avenger – of ladies who become prey to disloyal men.

While female agency in literature is not an entirely new concept – as we can see in Ovid's tale, empowered female characters already existed in literature of the Antiquity – Chrétien's *Philomena* stands out as the first text in the French literary tradition to showcase agency for women protagonists. Furthermore, because Chrétien chose to depart from Latin, the language of the educated, and write in the people's language, he anchored his character's position as the first female character to break away from traditional gender roles and expectations and explore new possibilities. However, we cannot forget that this newfound agency comes at high cost: one has to survive and overcome physical and emotional trauma in order to gain this aspect of her personality.

⁶⁵ Rowland, Beryl. *Birds with Human Souls: a Guide to Bird Symbolism*, p. 106.

⁶⁶ *Philomena*, p. 952.

As we will see in later texts, Philomena is not the only one to suffer for her agency and independence.

Chapter 2. Too Much Power for One Woman: Shared Agency in *Cligès* and *Yvain ou le Chevalier au Lion*

Je préférerais être écartelée ...
Je ne prostituerai jamais mon corps.
-- Chrétien de Troyes
Cligès

Chrétien de Troyes' most well-known works, his five romances, contain a multitude of female characters, thus showcasing the author's varied representations of women. Although at first glance he appears to have women's interests at heart, further examination of his work reveals him to be much less progressive. Much like Philomena, many of his women characters pay a heavy price in order to exercise agency: without going through the same trauma as Philomena, Chrétien's female characters nevertheless must endure some form of crisis in order to have more freedom and power than their real-life counterparts. These crises can manifest themselves in different ways and affect central characters as well as minor characters in the romances. For instance, the eponymous woman in *Erec et Enide*, whose crisis is her husband's anger as she points out he is being ridiculed for his lack of chivalrous actions, or *Perceval's* Blanchefleur, who struggles to protect her castle and her people and is portrayed as a damsel in distress waiting to be saved by a man.

In this chapter, I focus on two romances: *Cligès* (written around 1176) and *Yvain ou le Chevalier au Lion* (finished around 1181) in which Chrétien creates specific circumstances for the development of female agency. I will begin by giving a brief summary of each story before analyzing the author's portrayal of the female characters in the romances.

In his second romance, *Cligès*, Chrétien tells the story of Fénice, daughter of the emperor of Germany, who, while he has already betrothed her to a duke, later agrees to give her to Alis,

Greek emperor of Constantinople and Cligès' uncle.¹ A series of battles and adventures ensue, during which the two young protagonists fall in love with each other, unknowingly becoming one another's cause of torment. Cligès then takes his leave from his uncle – and his beloved – to follow his father's footsteps in chivalry, and Fénice is forced to marry Alis, whom she cannot love. In order to save her body for her true love, Fénice, with the help of her servant Thessala, has Alis drink a potion that makes him believe he consummates his marriage every night. Upon Cligès's return from King Arthur's court, the two youths profess their love for one another. Once again, a potion is made, this time for Fénice to drink and appear to be dead, thus allowing her to be with Cligès, albeit in secret. After some time, the lovers are discovered and denounced, prompting them to flee to King Arthur's court. Alis, furious, raises an army to pursue them, but dies of spite before he can put his plan into action. Cligès and Fénice return to Constantinople, where they marry and are crowned emperor and empress, enjoying a happily ever after ending according to the narrator.

In *Yvain et le Chevalier au Lion*, Chrétien tells the story of the devoted servant Lunette and her lady Laudine as he narrates the exploits of its eponymous hero. The story begins as Yvain embarks on a chivalrous quest that leads him to battle and kill a knight, but also leaves him stranded and locked in the castle of the aforementioned knight. Lunette, recognizing him from a past encounter during which he was the only person who spoke to her, repays his kindness by helping him hide from the angry villagers looking to punish him for slaying their lord. As he observes life in the castle from his secret place, he quickly falls in love with the grieving widow, the as yet unnamed Laudine. After Lunette successfully convinces her lady that she needs a new protector for her and her people and that none would be better than the knight who overpowered her late

¹ Since I will be focusing on Fénice, I am purposefully omitting the first part of the romance (verses 1-2581), which tells the adventures of Alexandre and Soredamor, Cligès's parents, as well as the conflict between Alexandre and his brother Alis over the title of Emperor of Constantinople.

husband, Laudine marries Yvain. She then grants him a period of one year during which he can leave to participate in tournaments and maintain his chivalrous glory, but after which he must return or will lose the lady's love. Upon receiving the news that he has exceeded his allotted time and is no longer welcome back, Yvain loses his mind and temporarily lives as a savage. A series of events follow that bring him back to Laudine's castle, where he discovers that Lunette is being held responsible by her lady for his failure to fulfill his promise and will be executed unless a knight saves her. Yvain, in disguise, frees Lunette from her captors and, after some more adventures, the three protagonists are reunited in the same location, where, in return for saving her, Lunette helps Yvain win back the love of her mistress and reconcile with her.

In these two romances, the conditions for the female characters to demonstrate agency is somewhat different from what Philomena and Procné had to endure. Whereas Chrétien's first ladies had to survive traumatic experiences, here Fénice and Laudine are faced with crises that can only be solved by transcending traditional gender roles and finding in themselves the power to make independent decisions. While the circumstances in which they find themselves may appear less harsh than they are in *Philomena*, not only do the ladies portrayed face hardships, but they are also shown to share their agency with their confidante or servant. Indeed, *Cligès'* Fénice would not attain her goal without the invaluable help from Thessala, and *Yvain's* Laudine owes most of her resolutions to her servant Lunette's initiatives. In both cases, the crisis that needs solving is related to marriage issues: Fénice is forced into marriage to a man who is not her true love, and Laudine must manage being recently widowed but still needing the protection of a knight for herself, her land and her people.

Cligès: escaping a loveless marriage

Soon to be married Fénice, “repulsed by the thought of giving her body to a man who does not have her heart ... and of causing Cligès to be disinherited,”² finds herself in an impasse that she can only escape by devising her own stratagem. Thus, the crisis that propels Fénice’s discovery of her agency is the fear of losing what she values (she refuses to become an adulterer or to lose her virtue to anyone but her true love) and of sullying the honor of the man she loves. Two distinct elements are at play in creating Fénice’s crisis, both having to do with her education or knowledge of the world. First, she has heard the story of Tristan and Yseut and categorically rejects being associated with them:

Je préférerais être écartelée plutôt que de vivre dans le souvenir des amours de Tristan et Yseut dont on raconte tant de folies, honteuses à rappeler. Je ne pourrais jamais m’accomoder de l’existence qu’Yseut a menée. Amour s’y est montré trop grossier : le cœur pour un seul et le corps pour deux propriétaires. C’est ainsi qu’elle passa toute sa vie ; elle ne refusa ni l’un ni l’autre. Cet amour ne fut pas raisonnable alors que le mien restera immuable à tout jamais car je ne séparerai jamais, à aucun prix, mon corps de mon cœur. Je ne prostituerai jamais mon corps qui ne connaîtra jamais deux bénéficiaires. Qui a le cœur a également le corps ; j’écarte toute autre personne comme intruse.³

(I’d rather be torn limb from limb than have people in referring to us recall the love of Iseut and Tristan, about whom such nonsense is talked that I’m ashamed to speak of it. I couldn’t reconcile myself to the life Iseut led. With her, love was too debased, for her body was made over to two men, whilst her heart belonged entirely to one. In this way she spent her whole life without ever rejecting one. This love was unreasonable, but mine is firm and constant, nor will my body or my heart ever be shared under any circumstances. Never will my body be prostituted between two owners. Let him who has the heart have the body: I reject all others.)

Fénice’s fear is rooted in the risk of enduring public shame as well as tainting her love and her body by splitting herself between two men. She would rather suffer physical pain than “be prostituted.” The notion that a woman must be pure until her wedding and must be faithful to her

² Joan Task Grimbert in “*Cligès* and the Chansons: A Slave to Love”, p.121.

³ *Cligès*, p. 248

husband is so ingrained in her mind that allowing two men (Alis, her husband, and Cligès, her lover) to simultaneously enjoy her carnally amounts to prostitution. By using the idea of prostitution, Chrétien ensured that his readers would understand Fénice's dilemma. John Baldwin explains that, in the author's time, the central place given to marriage by the Church created margins, occupied by prostitutes on the one hand and holy matrons on the other. "To one side, therefore, stood the desolate figure of the prostitute, a woman whose sexuality was available to numerous clients for money or other remuneration." While it was not regulated by public authority until the fourteenth century, it was nonetheless predominantly condemned. Baldwin points out that although financial compensation was typically involved "her accessibility, however, is the crucial factor because even without gain she would still be a prostitute" and adds that, in his *Decretum*, Gratian defined a prostitute as "one who is open to the lusts of many."⁴ For Fénice, then, if she satisfied both Alis' marital expectations and Cligès' desire and it became public knowledge, the humiliation and emotional torment that would ensue are far worse than the pain of being quartered.

Marriage being given such a prominent place led society to have numerous expectations of women. In addition to her fear of being seen as promiscuous, Fénice therefore had to maneuver society's rules all the while attempting to solve her crisis. As Georges Duby explains, in the 12th century:

At the very time when courtly eroticism was coming into its own, a powerful current of a different kind also began to take shape [...] Placing the married state at the pinnacle of a system of values, this current of thought exalted virginity for young girls, who were enjoined to preserve their sexual purity, reticence, and modesty before marriage.⁵

This ideal of purity until marriage likely informs Fénice's fear of being forced into an alliance with Alis: in her mind, that marriage is a travesty because she does not love him. Society's ideals,

⁴ Baldwin, John W. *The Language of Sex: Five Voices from Northern France Around 1200*, pp. 78-80.

⁵ Duby, *Medieval Marriage: Two Models from Twelfth-Century France*, p. 15.

therefore, are at the root of her crisis. If she allows Alis to enjoy her body, she will lose her sexual purity for Cligès, should they be able to be together at a later date. Jørgen Bruhn summarizes Fénice's problem in simple terms: How can she make love while staying a virgin?⁶

Much like Philomena when she realizes she has to save herself, Fénice understands that she must find her own solution to her crisis. She therefore imagines that she needs a trick of sorts to ensure that, despite marrying Alis against her wish, he cannot get anything from her:

Si vous connaissiez une ruse
pour frustrer de ma personne,
celui à qui je suis promise,
vous me rendriez un immense service.⁷

(If, though, you were skilful enough to prevent the man I'm given and pledged to from having any share in me, you would have done me a very welcome service.)

Here is where Chrétien gives his reader another representation of female agency: as she is formulating and voicing her idea, she is not alone. The "vous" she is referring to is her governess and confidante Thessala, to whom she just confessed being lovesick and with whom she shared her dilemma. I argue that it is in this moment, when she clearly lays out her plan and asks for help to put it into execution, that Fénice shows her first sign of agency. Indeed, up to that point she can be characterized as an object, a commodity for her father; she had no will. Typical for the 12th century, her father makes decisions for her life based on what suits him best. He first betrothed her to the duke of Saxony, but quickly changes his mind when Alis's emissaries come tell him that the emperor of Constantinople wants to marry Fénice.⁸ He is only too happy to oblige, but mentions one small problem Alis would have to deal with:

⁶ Bruhn, Jørgen. *Lovely Violence: Chrétien De Troyes' Critical*, p. 43.

⁷ *Cligès*, p. 249.

⁸ As Duby explains, one of the main functions of marriage is to unite two houses in a public celebration. By choosing the emperor of Constantinople over the duke of Saxony as his daughter's husband, he seemingly makes a more profitable alliance. (Duby, p.4)

L'empereur fut enchanté de cette demande et il leur accorda joyeusement sa fille ; ainsi, il ne succombait à aucune mésalliance et ne diminuait en rien son prestige. Toutefois, il leur apprit qu'il avait déjà fiancé sa fille au duc de Saxe ; ils ne pourraient donc l'emmener que si leur empereur venait lui-même en Allemagne avec une puissante armée pour lui éviter les représailles du duc ainsi que la honte et le désastre qui s'ensuivraient.⁹

(The emperor was delighted with this message and happily granted them his daughter, for in this he does not debase himself at all or diminish his honour in the least. But he says he had promised to give her to the Duke of Saxony, and they would not manage to take her away unless the emperor came bringing powerful forces, so that the duke would not be able to do him any harm or harass him on the homeward journey.)

For the emperor of Germany (Fénice's father) to specify that Alis can have this daughter but will need a powerful army in the event of the duke's retaliation emphasizes that she is seen as an object instead of a person. She can be transferred like property from one male character to the other, and deals can be broken and made based on the prestige and political value they bring, as long as all parties are aware of the situation. Alis is warned that he can have Fénice, as long as he is prepared to show strength and defend his new acquisition. This idea is only accentuated by the fact that Fénice does get abducted by the duke of Saxony and must be retrieved. Deciding to deceive the husband who was chosen for her can be interpreted as an act of disobedience to her father and rebellion against society's expectations and is also her first step in exploring her agency.

In her study of *Willful Subjects*, Ahmed examines the shared characteristics between willfulness and disobedience, and defines the latter as "the trait of being unwilling to obey."¹⁰ To illustrate her point, she applies her theory to Sophocle's Antigone who intends on burying her brother in defiance of her uncle's command. Ahmed states that Antigone "is willing to die before she is willing to obey not because disobedience is her aim (the judgement of willfulness often creates this impression), but because disobedience is required to achieve her aim to bury her

⁹ *Cligès*, pp. 236-237.

¹⁰ Ahmed, p. 137.

brother.”¹¹ The same reasoning can be applied to Fénice’s story: she is willing to suffer physical pain (“Je préférerais être écartelée” / I’d rather be torn limb from limb ¹²) before she is willing to obey her father’s wish and fulfill her conjugal duty to Alis. Just like Antigone, disobedience is not her goal, but is a necessary step to achieve her objective to preserve herself for her true love. Ahmed further asserts that “the one who does not obey is diagnosed as willful.”¹³ In that sense, Fénice’s unwillingness to comply with her father’s decision effectively makes her a willful subject, a trait that I correlate with agency.

This agency, however, is split: although Fénice devises the solution to her problem herself, she needs the assistance of a character who has more freedom to act, as well as the knowledge to put the plan into action. By having Fénice ask for help from her lady in waiting, Chrétien tells us that she is not in a position to save herself by herself. I argue that, here, he also comments on the organization of society and hints that members of lower classes may have an inherent freedom to act that nobles do not. Thessala, Fénice’s governess and servant, is not subject to the same social constraints and expectations and, while she is a woman, gender roles in lower classes may not be as strictly defined as they are for nobility. Additionally, she is devoted to Fénice and will help in any way she can. As we see, her immediate response to the young lady’s demand is to accept and to put her knowledge to her service: “Sa nourrice y consent et dit qu’avec ses nombreuses conjurations, potions et enchantements, Fénice aurait tort de craindre l’empereur quand il aura bu la potion qu’elle lui fera absorber.” (Then her nurse promises her that she will weave so many spells and make so many potions and charms that she need never be wary or afraid of this emperor once he had taken the drink she will provide for him).¹⁴ Thessala then explains that with the potion,

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² *Cligès*, p. 248.

¹³ Ahmed, p. 137.

¹⁴ *Cligès*, p. 249.

Alis will only get his pleasure from his dreams, thus protecting Fénice from her fear of sharing her body by creating a form of barrier between the couple.

Chrétien portrays these two female characters as inseparable; their close relationship is the key to assuming their agency, both as individuals and as a team. On the one hand, Fénice is conscious of her situation and actively seeks a solution but is unable to find one her own. On the other hand, Thessala demonstrates an impressive aptitude for quick-thinking and problem solving but would have no cause for showcasing it without her protégée's crisis. Furthermore, they cement the strength of their relationship by sealing it with an oath: "Sur la foi du serment, l'une et l'autre se promettent de ne souffler mot de ce plan afin qu'il reste secret." (They mutually promise and swear that this plan shall be kept so secret that no one will ever get to know of it).¹⁵ In doing so, they further demonstrate their shared agency and their need for one another.

After the oath is sworn, they separate and the narrator focuses on Thessala who not only makes the potion that will trick Alis, but also finds a way to have it delivered without raising suspicions. Ingeniously, she makes Cligès the instrument of his uncle's abuse and of his own future happiness. The young man serves the drink to his uncle, and Fénice's wish becomes reality: at night, the emperor believes he is consummating his marriage like any newlywed should, but he is only dreaming and Fénice remains untouched. Thus, her first crisis is resolved: she has managed to remain a virgin despite being married to a man she does not love, protecting her virginity in the hope that she can give it to Cligès in the future.

Her journey, however, does not end here. Once Cligès has become a successful and accomplished knight at King Arthur's court, his focus shifts back to his love for Fénice and he decides to return to Constantinople. After some time admiring each other from afar, the pair finally

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 250.

confess their love to one another, and Fénice discloses everything. She tells Cligès that, thanks to a potion, Alis has only been under the illusion that he possessed her, but he never actually did touch her. She admits that she was preserving herself for her true love “Mon cœur est tout à vous ; mon corps est tout à vous et personne ne pourra s’autoriser de mon exemple pour commettre une vilenie. Quand mon cœur s’est rendu à vous, il vous a donné et promis le corps de sorte que personne d’autre n’y aura part.” (My heart is yours and yours is my body, and no one will ever learn base behaviour from my example; for when my heart gave itself up to you, it presented you with the body and promised it to you so that no other shall have any share in it).¹⁶ The potion provided by Thessala made female self-ownership possible. Fénice, who was initially portrayed as a mere object of exchange between men, is now able to control who gains access to her body.

Here I would like to make a small digression to discuss the significance of their declaration. Examining their initial encounter, scholars have argued whether or not the pair exercise free will when they first fall in love with one another. While some claim that they are in complete control and that their love is born of the free encounter of two individuals, Joan Task Grimbert, citing opposing opinions, concludes that “in no case have we seen [them] falling in love as a result of having considered any quality of the beloved other than physical beauty” and appear to submit to an exterior force that they cannot control. Though I agree with that point, she goes on to doubt whether this aspect changes later on and asks: “do they at least exercise it in conducting affairs of the heart?”¹⁷ I believe the answer to that question is yes, despite being brought together by forces beyond their power, they do express free will in the remainder of their adventures. I would argue that their profession of love is a prime example even if, as Karl Uitti explains, they do so according

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 299.

¹⁷ Joan Task Grimbert, “On Fénice’s Vain Attempts to Revise a Romantic Archetype and Chrétien’s Fabled Hostility to the Tristan Legend,” pp. 94-95.

to the tropes of courtly love.¹⁸ Fénice's confession is particularly notable as we are constantly reminded of her denouncement of Tristan and Yseut's story. I would categorize this admission that she is in love with a man other than her husband as a display of agency in itself.

While it seems like the lovers can finally be happy, Fénice, therefore still concerned with her possible resemblance with Yseut, reveals to Cligès – and the readers – her second crisis. She tells Cligès:

Si je vous aime et si vous m'aimez, on ne vous appellera pas Tristan pour autant, et moi, je ne serai jamais Yseut. Notre amour n'aurait rien de preux car il encourrait le blame et recèlerait le vice. Jamais vous n'obtiendrez d'autre plaisir de mon corps que celui que vous avez actuellement, si vous n'étudiez pas un moyen de m'enlever à votre oncle et de m'arracher à son union, de sorte qu'il ne puisse plus me retrouver ni nous blamer, ni moi, ni vous, et qu'il ne sache à qui s'en prendre.¹⁹

(If I love you and you love me, you shall never be called Tristan nor I Iseut, for then this would be no honourable love. But I promise you that you'll never have any pleasure of me other than you now have unless you contrive a way for me to be taken by stealth from your uncle and my union with him, so that he can never find me again or be able to blame either you or me or know what to do about it.)

Although satisfied that she has protected her body until she could be reunited with Cligès, she makes it very clear that he will not enjoy her carnally any more than his uncle until that union is dissolved in a way that no blame can be placed on the lovers.

This second obstacle – refusing to be blamed for adultery – also prompts Fénice to take matters into her own hands. She proceeds to order Cligès to spend the night thinking of a solution and commits to searching for one as well. His answer proves disappointing: he proposes to flee to Britain, where they would be welcomed with joy. She immediately rejects his proposition, as fleeing in this manner would only make their similarity with Tristan and Yseut even more likely. She did not come to their meeting empty-handed: this new crisis has once again forced her to

¹⁸ Karl Uitti, p. 51: "Linguistically, the two of them act out their feelings in terms of fashionable courtly diction. The truth of their (real) love for one another finally comes out in this metaphorically 'poetic' language."

¹⁹ *Cligès*, pp. 299-300.

analyze her situation and devise a plan that she feels is the only good way to obtain what she desires. Additionally, her strategy is very detailed, and she gives Cligès specific instructions concerning his role.

Voici mon plan, répondit-elle. Je n'irai pas avec vous, comme vous venez de le dire. [...] Je veux en effet passer pour morte ; tel est mon plan. Je vais bientôt feindre une maladie. De votre côté, songez à ma sépulture ! Arrangez-vous pour que la sépulture et le cercueil que vous me ferez fabriquer ne provoquent ni ma mort ni mon étouffement et que personne ne conçoive le moindre soupçon. Trouvez-moi un lieu de repos tel que, quand la nuit tombera, vous viendrez me tirer de là et que personne d'autre que vous ne me voie. [...] Si ce plan est habilement exécuté, nul n'en dira jamais de mal car personne n'y verra le moindre mal. Dans tout l'empire, on croira que mon corps a pourri en terre.²⁰

Her plan to avoid being associated with Yseut while still being able to enjoy the company of her love consists of faking her death and having Cligès arrange for a grave that will allow her to survive until he can come retrieve her and take her to a safe location. This plan is, I believe, a great demonstration of Fénice's agency. Not only has she found a solution, but she herself has thought of every little detail that will lead to a satisfactory resolution. Frappier aptly summarizes the young woman's attitude:

Éprise d'absolu dans l'ordre du sentiment, indifférente au faste impérial, prête à mener une existence humble pour être à celui qu'elle aime et qui l'aime (v. 3546-60), intrépide devant l'image du tombeau, Fénice apparaît comme une héroïne de la liberté intérieure. En elle vit la conscience de l'amour, de ses droits, de ses devoirs. Sa fausse mort la délivre d'une vie fausse. Elle meurt au monde pour naître à sa vie véritable, renaître comme le phénix que rappelle son nom. Ainsi l'a voulue Chrétien, dans la plénitude de son optimisme.²¹

(Perfectionist in love, ready to forsake the splendor of the emperor's court, bold enough to face a humble existence or the terrors of entombment, if only she can remain with the man she loves (and who loves her, vv5346-60). Fenice appears as a heroine of inner freedom. In her dwells a consciousness of love, of its rights and its duties. By means of her sham death, she is delivered from a life of sham, for she dies to the world and is reborn to her true life, like the phoenix adumbrated by her name. Chrétien's intent thus reveals an abundant optimism.)

²⁰ *Cligès*, pp. 301-302

²¹ Frappier, *Chrétien de Troyes*, p. 113. Translation by Raymond J. Cormier.

Her speech to Cligès is also a place for Chrétien to showcase once more the need for a secondary female character. Immediately after she has told him his part in her plan, Fénice specifies that she will be assisted in her part: “Thessala ma nourrice, la gouvernante qui a toute ma confiance, m’apportera son aide fidèle car elle est très intelligente, et je me fie totalement à elle.” (Thessala, who brought me up, my governess in whom I have great faith, will help me loyally, for she is wise, and I have every confidence in her).²² Once again, the young lady demonstrates independence by thinking of a plan as well as by asking for help in executing it. She exposes her idea to Thessala, prefacing it by saying she is the only person she trusts and adds that she feels with the governess on her side, the plan can only succeed. Just like the first time Fénice came to her for help, Thessala responds positively and, right away, explains she will make a potion that will fit the lady’s needs. So, they put the plan in motion: Fénice feigns being ill and demands to be left alone while Thessala works on brewing the potion that will imitate death.

In the meantime, Cligès also carries out his part of the scheme. Although the question of agency is not as significant for male characters, I would like to point out that Chrétien created a male parallel to the Fénice-Thessala duo. As accomplished a knight as he is, the young man also needs assistance to fulfill his role. He asks Jean, a serf, to come see him and explains that if he is willing to help Cligès and keep his secret, he will obtain his freedom in exchange. Despite the fact that the dynamics are different, their relationship is as crucial as that of the women for it is Jean who will build the trick coffin. In addition, he offers one of his houses (a tower with multiple secret rooms, each more beautiful than the last and fit to shelter a fine lady like Fénice) as a hiding place for the couple. Similar to the role Thessala plays in Fénice’s life, Jean provides the material

²² *Cligès*, p. 302.

solution after being told what the problem is. Without his help, Cligès would not have accomplished his tasks.

The trickery can now fully begin; Fénice feigns illness more and more, while Thessala switches out her lady's urine with that of a (truly) sick person, so as to confuse the doctors, whom the young empress refuses to see. Finally, Fénice drinks the potion brewed by her governess and is rendered corpse-like. Chrétien is very specific about her condition, specifying "Elle n'aurait remué ni le pied ni la main, même si on l'avait écorché vive ; elle ne bougeait pas, elle ne disait pas un mot mais elle entendait parfaitement." (and she would not have moved a hand or foot had she been flayed alive, nor does she stir or utter a word; yet she hears).²³ While this detail might seem superfluous, it rapidly become relevant. As the kingdom laments the loss of their empress, three traveling doctors, upon hearing the story, are reminded of Salomon's wife who hated him so much she faked her own death,²⁴ and subsequently become suspicious. They see through the scheme and attempt to make Fénice reveal herself by inflicting all kinds of torture on her body. The potion, as aforementioned, has rendered her impervious to pain and she is unable to react.

Fénice benefits, once more, from the assistance of other women. As the abuse is taking place, over a thousand ladies waiting outside happen to see what the doctors are doing and, outraged, burst in and push the three men through the window. At the same time, Thessala, who was in that group, picks up the damaged body of her lady, and covers it with a healing ointment before she is placed in her coffin. Jean's creation allows for her body to be protected until Cligès can get her out of her tomb and bring her to the tower where they will be hiding. The treatment inflicted by the doctors has tremendously weakened Fénice, and the couple is now truly scared for

²³ Ibid., p. 312.

²⁴ Philippe Walter, who edited this romance in the Pléiade edition I am using, specifies in the notes: "Tradition émanant sans doute du folklore biblique car la Bible elle-même n'évoque pas précisément les mésaventures conjugales de Salomon." p. 1166.

her health. The servants, however, come to the rescue again: Jean leaves them to go find Thessala, who, upon learning of the situation, gathers all her potions and medicines and rushes to the young lady's side. The essential role played by the governess is highlighted by Fénice's reaction upon seeing her: "Apercevant sa nourrice, Fénice croit aussitôt en sa guérison, tellement elle l'aime et lui fait confiance." (When Fenice sees her governess, she supposes she is quite cured, so much does she love her and believe and trust in her).²⁵ She instantly knows that everything will be alright, because Thessala has always been there to provide her guidance and help.

Once she has healed, the lovers are finally free to enjoy each other. Chrétien makes all their hard work appear worth their effort as we are told:

vraiment, Amour n'a commis aucune infamie en les unissant l'un à l'autre. Car, lorsqu'ils sont dans les bras l'un de l'autre et qu'ils se donnent des baisers, ils ont le sentiment que leur joie et leur bonheur rejaillissent sur le monde entier. [...] Tout ce qui fait plaisir à l'un est accepté par l'autre, dans un désir mutuel, comme si eux deux ne faisaient plus qu'un.²⁶

(Indeed, Love did not debase himself by pairing these two, for each of them feels as they embrace and kiss each other that the whole world must be a better place because of their joy and contentment. [...] but there is nothing that one of them wishes in which the other does not acquiesce. Thus they share a single desire, as if the two of them were but one.)

Their happiness lasts for about fifteen months, during which Fénice lives in the tower and Cligès visits her. As a new summer season draws near, however, the young lady grows weary and expresses her desire to be outdoors again. Cligès goes to Jean for advice, who reveals a secret door that leads to a beautiful sunny orchard, conveniently rendered inaccessible and protected by a high wall.

As we have seen so far, Fénice and Cligès's story is filled with unexpected developments and, when hunting season arrives, it also presents yet another hurdle for the couple. A young knight

²⁵ *Cligès*, p. 325.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 325-326.

who happened to be chasing game in the tower's vicinity follows his sparrowhawk and, for the lovers' misfortunes, "vit dormir Cligès et Fénice, côte à côte et totalement nus." (he saw Fenice and Cligès, both naked, sleeping in a close embrace).²⁷ At the same time as he is doubting his eyes – he too believes the empress is dead – a pear falls off the tree and on Fénice, waking her only to realize that they have been discovered. The intruder, now certain of the lady's identity, flees and rushes to the emperor's court to report what he has just witnessed. In the time that it takes for Alis to go to the tower in order to see the treachery for himself, Cligès and Fénice have made their escape, accompanied by Thessala who comforts them. "Thessala usera alors de ses talents d'enchanteresse ; le don d'invisibilité qu'elle peut dispenser à volonté sera fort précieux en la circonstance." (Thessala will then use her enchantress talents; the gift of invisibility that she can dispense at her will will be quite precious in this circumstance).²⁸

Yet again, the noble couple is saved by the servants' ingenuity and devotion, as while Thessala is protecting them from potential assailants, Jean remains faithful throughout Alis's interrogation. Indeed, he refuses to divulge their hiding place and defends his master's honor by reminding Alis of the oath he once took to never marry in order for Cligès to inherit the throne.²⁹ I would also argue that Jean does the lovers a great favor, albeit unknowingly, as he discloses the entire story of their ruse. Although it may seem counterproductive at first glance, I believe that by revealing the truth he accelerates the path to their happy ending as he also exposes the emperor's treason, which makes Cligès and Fénice's deception seem more legitimate. Alis then sends henchmen after his nephew, who has found shelter at King Arthur's court. The latter is about to

²⁷ Ibid., p. 328.

²⁸ Philippe Walter's note 1 on page 330, p. 1169.

²⁹ In the first part of *Cligès*, dedicated to the eponymous character's parents, we learn that Alexandre and Alis made a pact upon their father's death: despite the former being the firstborn, the latter would enjoy the title of emperor as long as he made a vow of celibacy. After some time however, Alis's advisors convinced him to break his promise and suggested Fénice as a suitable wife for an emperor. See pps 230-236.

send an army back to Constantinople to defend Cligès's birthright when a team of messengers, including Jean, bring the news of Alis's death. The couple is now free to return to their kingdom, where they are wed, crowned emperor and empress, and live to see their love grow every day. As we are told, thus ends the story of Cligès, which I will set aside for now.

Yvain: finding a suitable second husband to overcome widowhood

In *Yvain ou le chevalier au lion*, the author portrays the lady and servant relationship in a distinctly different way from Fénice's and Thessala's: while the participation of both women characters is as essential for this story to proceed as it is in the previous one, Chrétien divides this agency in two very unequal parts. As we will see, Laudine, although she is the lady in a situation of crisis (her husband has been killed and it is necessary for her to remarry), makes very few decisions and is easily convinced by the people who surround her. It is Lunette, whom Tony Hunt describes as "a strong contrast, in her loyal, determined and unwavering assistance, to the touchy Laudine, [who] stands out for her masculine independence and initiative, appropriating a set of male roles without difficulty as well as possessing a lucid capacity for manipulating and influencing events,"³⁰ therefore becomes responsible for finding solutions and for most of the decision-making.

The two female protagonists' involvement in Yvain's adventures begin with his unfortunate imprisonment in the lady's castle, as he chases the knight who appeared to defend the magic fountain. Lunette enters the room where he is trapped and explains to a concerned Yvain the situation he finds himself in:

³⁰ Hunt, Tony. "Le Chevalier au Lion: Yvain Lionheart," in *A Companion to Chrétien de Troyes*, p.161.

Assurément, chevalier, fait-elle, je crains que vous ne soyez pas le bienvenu par ici ! Si l'on vous capture en ces lieux, attendez-vous à être taillé en pièces, car mon seigneur est blessé à mort et je sais bien que vous êtes le coupable. Ma dame manifeste un tel deuil et ses gens poussent de tels cris de désespoir que cette détresse pourrait bien les amener au suicide. Ils savent parfaitement que vous êtes ici mais leur immense douleur les empêche, pour l'instant de s'occuper de vous. Ils ont pourtant l'intention de vous tuer ou de vous faire prisonnier. Vous ne leur échapperez pas quand ils auront décidé de s'en prendre à vous.³¹

(Really, sir knight, she says, I'm afraid you've got yourself into trouble. If you're seen in here you'll be hacked to pieces, because my lord is mortally wounded, and I'm sure you have caused his death. My lady is in such a state of grief along with her people lamenting around her that they're almost killing themselves with sorrow. And they are certain you're in here, though they're so overcome by anguish that they can't do anything about it now. If they wish to kill or capture you, they can't fail to do so when they do come to set about you.)

By having Lunette be not only the first to speak, but also be the one who informs Yvain – and the reader at the same time – about the events happening outside his makeshift cell, Chrétien immediately introduces her as a female character with agency, as well as a character who is essential to the story. Indeed, coming to see Yvain and warning him that he is in danger is entirely her own decision, and one that she makes against her best interest. Despite her belonging to the group that will soon seek revenge on the knight responsible for their lord's impending demise, Lunette comes to rescue Yvain as a way to repay a debt she feels she owes him:

si cela est en mon pouvoir, je me mettrai à votre service. Je vous témoignerai des égards car, jadis, vous avez fait de même envers moi. Un jour, ma dame m'envoya porter un message à la cour du roi. Sans doute n'avais-je pas la prudence, la courtoisie ou le comportement qui sied à une jeune fille, en tout cas aucun chevalier ne m'adressa la parole, excepté vous ! Oui, soyez-en vivement remercié, vous m'avez honorée et rendu service. Je vous offrirai désormais la juste récompense de l'honneur que vous m'avez témoigné alors.³²

(You may be sure too that, if I could, I would serve and honour you because you, indeed, did the same for me. My lady once sent me on an errand at the king's court. Perhaps I wasn't as prudent, courtly or well behaved as a maiden should be; but there was not a single knight who deigned to speak a word to me except you alone who stand here. But you,

³¹ *Yvain ou le chevalier au lion*, p. 363.

³² *Ibid.*, pp. 363-364.

thanks to your great kindness, honoured and served me there. For that honour you did me there I shall reward you here.)

As we see here, her motivation to help Yvain is entirely personal. She proceeds to give him a ring that will make him invisible, thus protecting him from the knights looking to kill him. I argue that this is a display of agency because she knowingly puts herself in danger by helping him: if she is found out, she will likely be considered a traitor and punished for her kindness. Additionally, she clearly states that she is fulfilling her own will: “Puisse-je rendre grâce à Dieu de m’avoir donné l’occasion et le plaisir de vous être agréable, car j’en avais fort envie !” (But praise be to God who has given me the occasion and opportunity to do something to please you, for I longed to do so!)³³

These first pages with Lunette’s presence establish the dynamics of the lady-servant duo in this romance: the servant will be more active than the lady she serves. By contrast, the noble Laudine’s first scene in the romance shows her lamenting and crying in pain, as her dead husband’s body is carried away. Yvain, who is able to witness the funeral ceremony through a small window pointed out by his savior, instantly falls in love with the lady and forgets the danger of his situation, now obsessed with the idea of meeting her.

While he is taken with love, Lunette returns to her lady to attempt to console her and persuade her that what she needs is not death, but instead a new – and better – husband. As Laudine becomes increasingly frustrated with her servant for suggesting that there can be a better husband than the one she just lost, the servant interrupts her to expose the lady’s crisis:

Mais, sans vouloir vous fâcher, je voudrais bien savoir qui va défendre vos terres quand le roi Arthur arrivera la semaine prochaine près du perron de la fontaine. N’avez-vous pas été avertie par la Demoiselle Sauvage qui vous a envoyé une lettre à ce sujet ? Ah ! comme elle a bien fait ! Vous devriez dès maintenant prendre des dispositions pour défendre votre fontaine, et vous n’arrêtez pas de pleurer !³⁴

³³ Ibid., p. 365.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 378.

(But now, if you please, tell me who will defend your land when King Arthur comes ; because next week he's due to arrive at the slab and spring. You've already been informed of this in the letter sent you by the Dameisele Sauvage. Ah ! what a good turn that was ! Now you ought to be making arrangements for the defence of your spring, and you never stop weeping !)

As the one who is conscious of the problem they need to solve and who attempts to take the first step at finding a solution, Lunette, I argue, demonstrates that she has a great deal of agency. Just like Thessala, however, she does not use that power for her own benefit but instead to better assist her lady. Although Laudine keeps rejecting her advice and pushing her away, Lunette is relentless and insists that finding a husband will be a much better solution to her problem than mourning. Eventually, the lady demands to know who her servant believes to be a better knight and protector than her late husband. Her answer shows, once more, that Lunette is committed to employ her free will in the service of others. She tells Laudine that when two knights have fought in a duel, surely the superior is the victor; therefore, the knight who would be a better husband is the one responsible for the deceased's passing! In exposing this theory, on the one hand, Lunette tries to repay Yvain's kindness by making him appear to be a promising second husband. On the other hand, and more importantly, she tends to the lady's crisis by providing the best solution possible. Indeed, as mentioned, King Arthur is on his way to see for himself the mystery of the fountain, making the need for a protector even more pressing.

Laudine finally accepts that her servant is only trying to help, and also that she is right in suggesting the superior knight for a suitable remarriage. She asks for forgiveness for her behavior and makes inquiries about the knight. This conversation, I maintain, is her first demonstration of agency: she has come to terms with her husband's death and is now fully conscious of the problem she faces. Admitting that she was wrong and asking for information about the unknown knight is to take a first step towards solving her crisis.

When Lunette discloses Yvain's identity, Laudine immediately becomes more animated and starts planning her nuptials. She takes charge by ordering Lunette to send for Yvain (she does not know that he is still in the castle), by discussing the need for a new husband with her advisors, and by setting up her first meeting with the knight. Once he has declared his love for her and she has forgiven him for the murder of her late husband, they appear together before Laudine's people who, recognizing Yvain, enjoin her to make him her new husband. Here, Chrétien portrays Laudine as a female character with agency: her people show their support to their lord's killer, whom, unbeknownst to them, she had already made the decision to marry. As Marcelle Munson puts it, Laudine "prudently withholds the information from her vassals that Yvain was indeed the killer of Esclados. By manipulating the content of her narrative, she manages to guarantee the outcome that she desires; namely, the vassals' consent to her remarriage to Yvain."³⁵ The same day, the wedding is celebrated, thus solving the ladies' first crisis: Laudine is no longer a widow and the castle and the fountain are once again under the protection of a valiant knight.

This reprieve is short-lived: as expected, King Arthur arrives with his court and Yvain reveals himself to be the new guardian of the fountain. A big celebration is organized during which the eponymous character is reunited with his companions. Initially depicted as a happy occasion, the festivities become the scene for Lunette and Laudine's second crisis of the romance. Although his approach to the story is different, Jean Frappier also reads this passage as a moment of crisis: "Gauvain va jouer le rôle d'un tentateur en proposant à son ami Yvain une campagne de tournois ; le discours qu'il lui adresse constitue le pivot du roman et contient toutes les raisons du conflit psychologique et moral qui soumettra le bonheur des nouveaux époux à une épreuve." (Gauvain will play the role of a tempter by offering his friend Yvain a campaign of tournaments; his speech

³⁵ Munson, Marcelle. "Cil qu'il'escrist: Narrative Authority and Intervention in Chrétien de Troyes's *Yvain*," p. 43.

to him forms the pivotal point of the romance and contains all the reasons for the psychological and moral conflict that will test the happiness of the newlyweds).³⁶ During the week-long celebration, the king's men try to convince Yvain to accompany them back to court, but it is Gauvain who, in the end, succeeds. He makes a long speech in which he warns his companion "against the perils of losing his fame and reputation as a knight by settling down with his wife in the obscurity of Brocéliande. In order to merit the love of his lady, he tells Yvain he must leave her and gain fame in jousts and tournaments."³⁷ He also adds, Frappier notes, that "le plaisir se perd par l'habitude ; le bonheur se prolonge par les attentes et les relais," (pleasure is lost with habit; happiness is prolonged through expectations and relays).³⁸ hinting that Yvain would draw even more pleasure from his wife's company should he savor it in small doses instead of having access to it at will. Finally, to guarantee that he will have his way, Gauvain points out that staying would put their friendship at risk: "Veillez, cher compagnon, à ne pas mettre un terme à notre amitié car ce n'est pas moi qui la tuerai." (Take care, my dear companion, not to be responsible for the breakdown of our comradeship, for it certainly won't lapse through me).³⁹ In having Gauvain emphasize the importance of their friendship in opposition to Yvain's marital situation, Chrétien highlights an important aspect of chivalry: male bonding trumps heterosexual romance. As Richard Kaeuper explains, one of chivalry's many functions is to act as "a framework for love and the relationship between the sexes."⁴⁰ While the focus has more often been placed on romantic love between men and women, several scholars have suggested that male bonding in chivalric romances is more important than the relations between knights and ladies. He proposes that the

³⁶ Frappier, *Etude sur Yvain ou le chevalier au lion de Chrétien de Troyes*, p. 39.

³⁷ Uitti, p. 77.

³⁸ Frappier, *Etude sur Yvain*, p. 39.

³⁹ *Yvain*, p. 400.

⁴⁰ Richard W. Kaeuper, *Chivalry and Violence in Medieval Europe*, p. 209.

violence knights experience in their lives, as a common factor, is responsible for this powerful connection they share.⁴¹

Although I am more concerned with the female characters' behavior, Gauvain's sermon has enough of an impact on the tale as a whole, and especially on Laudine and Lunette's stories, to merit being analyzed a little further. I would argue that Gauvain's influence on Yvain is an example of what we would label today as toxic masculinity. Coined by psychology professor Shepherd Bliss in the 1980s "to characterize his father's militarized, authoritarian masculinity,"⁴² the term toxic masculinity emphasizes the harmful effects of conformity to certain traditional cultural masculine norms. These norms include, for instance, competitiveness, risk-taking behavior, self-reliance, and the pursuit of status.⁴³ While such a notion did not exist during the Middle Ages, I believe it can be useful in interpreting Gauvain's attitude in regard to Yvain's marriage. Indeed, in trying to persuade his friend to leave his wife and pursue chivalrous adventures with him, Gauvain appeals to Yvain's knowledge of what makes a good knight – and by extension a good man and husband. Baiting him with the promise of tournaments and glory, Gauvain illustrates the fact that men, like women, are subject to strictly defined gender roles. Furthermore, these social constructs are detrimental to men, women, and society overall: Yvain's intrinsic need to prove himself to be a brave and worthy knight is what initially prompted him to search for the magical fountain and will now, enjoined by Gauvain, put his recently celebrated marriage in jeopardy.

Finally convinced, Yvain asks Laudine permission to leave, explaining that "*il voulait accompagner le roi et participer aux tournois pour qu'on ne le traite pas de lâche.*" (to take part in

⁴¹ Ibid. pp. 215-216.

⁴² Carol Harrington, "What is 'Toxic Masculinity' and Why Does it Matter?," p. 3.

⁴³ Peter Hess, www.popsoci.com/research-shows-that-toxic-masculinity-is-harmful-to-mens-mental-health/

tournaments to avoid being called recreant).⁴⁴ The lady agrees, but only on the condition that he return after one year, otherwise her love will turn to hate. Yvain accepts her terms, and she gives him a ring that should protect him and remind him of her. I contend that Yvain's decision to leave gives Laudine the opportunity to demonstrate her agency twice. First, the fact that she sets strict limits to her husband's adventures shows that she is in charge of their relation and she has no problem expressing her desires and making demands of a male character. Second, as Yvain fails to return within his allotted time, she sends a messenger to announce that she does not want to see him ever again and that she wants her ring returned to her. This decision to uphold her word is a show of agency because it implies that she also makes the decision to lose the knight's protection for her and her people. Conscious of the potential consequences, she makes her will known and expects her wishes to be respected.

The effects of Gauvain's speech and Yvain's departure go even further, as Laudine blames her servant for her misfortune. After some time, Yvain finds his way back to the fountain, he finds out that Lunette is being held responsible for her lady's loss since she orchestrated their encounter and their wedding. She has been imprisoned and is now going to be executed unless a brave knight is willing to fight three others in her name. Remembering how she once saved him, Yvain, in disguise and calling himself "the Knight of the Lion,"⁴⁵ comes to her rescue the following day. Because Lunette is saved, she is exonerated and "la dame pardonna à cette dernière en oubliant généreusement sa rancœur." (the lady was quite happy to forgive her for the grief she had caused her).⁴⁶ Although he suffers from seeing his beloved without being able to fully enjoy her company, Yvain remains anonymous and leaves once again. Before he does, however, he begs Lunette to

⁴⁴ *Yvain*, p. 401.

⁴⁵ During his adventures away from Laudine, Yvain saves and befriends a lion. The knight and the animal become travel companions, leading to Yvain being dubbed the Knight of the Lion.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 449.

intercede in his favor to his lady. She accepts his request, and he departs, heading towards more adventures in which the two women play no part.

The romance ends with one final crisis for Laudine and Lunette to solve. Yvain finally understands that he cannot live without the love of his lady and decides to return once more to the magical fountain, where he plans on provoking a storm that will compel Laudine to forgive him:

Il decide alors de quitter seul la cour et d'aller guerroyer près de sa fontaine. Là-bas, il déchaînerait tellement de tonnerre, de vent et de pluie que sa dame serait contrainte à faire la paix avec lui ; si tel n'était pas le cas, il déchaînerait pour toujours la tourmente, la pluie et le vent de la fontaine.⁴⁷

(So he decided to leave the court on his own and go on the warpath to her spring, where he would cause such lightning, wind and rain that she would of necessity be compelled to make peace with him, or he would never stop the commotion at the spring, with the wind and the rain.)

In doing so, he becomes yet again the source of the women's problem: Lunette draws her lady's attention to the fact that they have no protector and reminds her that the men who live in her castle are too cowardly to take up the mantle. In her final demonstration of agency, Lunette imagines a solution that will serve multiple purposes: find a courageous knight to defend the fountain and the land, solve the initial crisis by reuniting her lady with Yvain, and repay her debt to the knight all the while continuing to serve her lady devotedly.

She suggests that the one who defeated the three knights in her name is a good candidate to assume the role of protector, but specifies that he will want something in return for his service:

Ma dame, s'il était possible de trouver celui qui tua le géant et qui vainquit les trois chevaliers, il serait bon d'aller le chercher, mais tant qu'il sera en guerre contre sa dame et tant que la colère et le ressentiment habiteront celle-ci, il ne daignera suivre personne, ni homme ni femme, en ce bas monde. Il faudrait d'abord lui jurer de faire l'impossible pour mettre fin à sa disgrâce auprès de sa dame, car cette disgrâce l'accable de douleur et de tourment.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 496.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 498.

(My lady, if anyone thinks he could find the man who killed the giant and defeated the three knights, he'd do well to have him fetched. To my knowledge, though, so long as he's the object of his lady's enmity, wrath and ill-will, there's no man or woman under heaven he'd follow before being pledged and promised that person's fullest possible help to allay the hostility his lady feels towards him, which is so great that he's dying of the grief and distress it causes him.)

Demonstrating again, along with her agency, her talent for persuasion, Lunette convinces her lady to prove her commitment to this task by swearing an oath. Laudine obliges and “jure sur un précieux reliquaire, à genoux et la main droite levée, qu'elle s'efforcerait de faire rendre au Chevalier au lion l'amour et les bonnes graces de sa dame.” (swears on a precious reliquary, on her knees and with her right hand raised, that she would do her best to restore the love and good graces of his lady to the Lion Knight).⁴⁹ Indeed, by involving religion in Laudine's oath, Lunette guarantees that Laudine will keep her word.

This feat accomplished, Lunette sets out to find Yvain and bring him back, only to find him standing by the fountain right outside the castle. Surprised but happy at this coincidence, she rushes to disclose to him the agreement she just made with Laudine. They immediately return to the castle, where Lunette reveals the truth to her lady, forcing her to choose between making peace with her husband or enduring the fountain's storm for all eternity. While she resents being coerced into forgiving his mistakes, she rejects even more the possibility of committing perjury and, therefore, consents to reconcile with Yvain. The romance concludes in happiness for the three main protagonists. The eponymous character is finally forgiven for his wrongdoings towards Laudine and the mutual love that is reborn between the spouses makes him forget his torments.

The lady's situation is best explained by Frappier:

Mais si son amour-propre a refoulé son amour au fond de son cœur, cet amour n'est pas mort. C'est pourquoi le dénouement, si bien imaginé, est lui aussi d'une parfaite justesse psychologique. Jamais Laudine ne consentirait d'elle-même à une réconciliation avec le

⁴⁹ Frappier, *Etude sur Yvain*, p. 57.

parjure ; mais grâce à l'incomparable Lunette son amour-propre est sauf, et dès lors, sans qu'elle daigne l'avouer, son amour reprend toute sa force.⁵⁰

(But if, deep in her heart, her love has been crushed by *amour-propre*, it is not dead. This is why the conclusion hangs together so well from a psychological point of view. Clearly, since Laudine would herself never consent to a reconciliation with the traitor, it falls to the inimitable Lunete to preserve her vanity, so that henceforth her love may be reinvigorated but not revealed.)

While it is not exactly a representation of agency, Laudine's commitment to her disdain for Yvain until she is strong-armed into forgiveness proves that she has more control over her life than female characters who fit the expectations of traditional gender roles. As for Lunette, Chrétien tells the reader that she also is very happy and "ses désirs sont comblés puisqu'elle a établie une paix durable entre monseigneur Yvain, le parfait ami, et sa parfaite et tendre amie." (her pleasure is complete now that she has made a lasting peace between my excellent lord Yvain and his beloved and matchless mistress).⁵¹ Thereby ends the tale of the Knight of the Lion, just like *Cligès*, with resolutions to all the problems faced and blissful denouement for all.

Fénice and Thessala, Laudine and Lunette: alike yet surprisingly different

Although I believe that these two romances belong together when examined through the lens of agency, I am also aware that there are many differences between *Cligès* and *Yvain*. As I have demonstrated, the main similarity in the tales is that Chrétien portrays agency as an attribute that must be split between a noble lady and her maid. Beyond that essential factor, however, the two pairs are very distinct.

⁵⁰ Frappier, *Chrétien de Troyes*, p. 166.

⁵¹ *Yvain*, p. 503.

I would like to begin by discussing the crises that lead the female characters in these texts to explore their agency and exceed expectations for their gender. While both deal with the question of marriage, the stories take different approaches to the problem. Fénice is distressed because she is forced into a loveless but strategic alliance chosen by her father and is, consequently, separated from her true love. As we can see through Georges Duby's explanation, it was the norm in Chrétien's time to arrange marriages based on their political usefulness. In a feudal society, "a woman was an object, a valuable object carefully guarded because of all the advantages that could be obtained through her. [...] an object of exchange, rather; a pawn in a game where men were the players."⁵² Fénice's hurdle, therefore, consists in becoming more than a mere object for her father's convenience. Unlike her, Laudine is worried about having become a widow in a society that is not much concerned with women's interests. Whilst under canon law widows could freely decide to remarry or not, this condition made them vulnerable and they might be forced to remarry in order to protect their property.⁵³ This is Laudine's situation, as her seneschal reminds her people:

Son mari est mort et elle se trouve désormais dans une situation pénible. Il ne reste plus qu'une toise de terre au propriétaire de ce domaine jadis immense et bien gouverné. [...] Une femme n'est pas faite pour porter l'écu ni manier la lance. En revanche, elle peut pallier ce manque et même le surmonter en prenant un vaillant époux. [...] Conseillez-lui tous de se remarier, sans quoi la coutume qui règne sur ce château depuis soixante ans risquait de disparaître !⁵⁴

(Her husband, to her sorrow, is dead. Now he who held this entire land and did so most admirably has but six feet of earth. [...] A woman is unable to bear a shield or strike with a lance. It is greatly to her profit and advantage to take a good husband [...] Advise her, all of you, to take a husband before the custom lapses which has been observed in this castle for over sixty years!)

⁵² Duby, *The Knight, the Lady and the Priest*, pp. 234-235.

⁵³ See Sara McDougall "Women and Gender in Canon Law," in *The Oxford Handbook of Women and Gender*, pp. 168-169, and Bonnie S. Anderson and Judith P. Zinsser in *A History of Their Own*, pp. 324-331.

⁵⁴ *Yvain*, p. 390.

The seneschal is clearly not concerned with Laudine's feelings or desires but only cares about the need to protect the land and its customs, a role which a woman is not suited to hold. Thus, the problem she must overcome is to fulfill her duty to her people and the custom of her land immediately after having lost a husband she appeared to love. By giving the impression that Laudine loved her first spouse due to her intense grief, Chrétien leaves a blank to be filled by the reader's imagination. On the one hand, he could be hinting that she had some agency prior to the beginning of the tale and married out of love; on the other hand, we can imagine that her love for the deceased was rooted in responsibility and her burden to defend the fountain.

Another characteristic that distinguishes Fénice from Laudine is the relationship they have with the other half of their respective pairs. On the one hand, Fénice and Thessala have a close bond due to the latter's role in the former's life. Being her governess instead of a simple maid, she raised Fénice and has been by her side since she was a child. They share a great deal of affection for one another, and as we see in multiple instances, the young lady has such faith in Thessala's devotion that she entrusts her with her life. On the other hand, Laudine and Lunette have a more traditional lady/servant rapport with defined roles. Theirs is not a loving relationship; on the contrary, despite Lunette's dedication to make her lady happy, Laudine repeatedly treats her poorly and verbally abuses her. We see this concern with punishment in the servant's behavior, for instance, in her fear of being reprimanded if she is away for too long.⁵⁵ The most obvious example of Laudine's mistreatment of her servant takes place after Yvain has passed his deadline to return. The lady blames Lunette for the hurt caused by Yvain's tardiness and accuses her of betraying her

⁵⁵ There are at least two episodes where Lunette expresses her fear. The first takes place during the funeral when she is keeping Yvain company. She says: "Je n'ose pas rester ici plus longtemps car je pourrais trop demeurer. On pourrait me soupçonner si l'on ne me voyait pas avec tout le monde dans la foule, et cela me vaudrait de sévères réprimandes." (p. 371) The second happens later, as she helps a young woman searching for Yvain. She points her in the direction he took after she last saw him and declares: "Je n'ose pas vous accompagner plus loin : ma dame pourrait m'en tenir rigueur." (p. 459)

trust in favor of the knight when she orchestrated their marriage. As mentioned, this situation leads to Lunette's sentencing to be burned at the stake unless a brave knight volunteers to defend her. While this passage finds a happy resolution, it proves that these two women do not have a relationship based on trust, again, in contrast with Fénice and Thessala. This disparity between the two pairs of female characters indicates that there are two distinct outcomes possible for the split agency imagine by Chrétien. In *Cligès*, it is shown to be beneficial to both parties, whereas in *Yvain* it is shown to bring hurt and pain.

These female duos also differ in the distribution and display of their shared agency. In *Cligès*, the lady is the main focus, she is at the center of the action throughout the story. She is undeniably an active character and takes concrete steps to improve her situation (feigning physical illness for example). Conversely, Laudine appears more passive – she is much less visible in the tale and is very stationary (she never leaves her castle, whereas her counterpart travels a lot, both within the city and across continents). Fénice is also the first in her pair to appear in the story and to show agency, while in *Yvain* it is the servant who makes her entrance and demonstrates her free will before the lady. Furthermore, the crises are exposed in different manners in the tales. In *Cligès*, Fénice understands her predicament, explains it to Thessala, and explains her idea to fix the problem before she finally asks for practical assistance. In *Yvain*, Laudine is adrift in her despair and lamentation over her loss until Lunette forces her to face reality. What is more, it is Lunette who reminds her of their imminent danger and provides a solution.

All these details reveal that there is a different balance in the sharing of agency between the two tales. In the case of Fénice and Thessala, the division is fairly equitable. Although the young empress would be unable to improve her situation without her governess' magical talents,

“Fénice bears full responsibility for inventing the plan[s] of deception.”⁵⁶ They can be seen as complementary forces; where, for the most part, one represents the head and the other represents the body. The situation is very different in *Yvain*: on the whole, Lunette is given a larger share of agency than her lady. Moreover, Laudine’s displays of agency are often prompted by her maid’s actions (such as her decision to marry Yvain, which comes after Lunette repeatedly reminds her that she needs to get over her grief and suggests the knight as a suitable candidate). Comparatively, amongst the noble ladies, Fénice is portrayed as having much more agency than Laudine; amongst the confidantes, Thessala seems to be slightly less autonomous than Lunette.

The use of nouns emphasizes the division of agency between the characters. Indeed, in both romances, Chrétien uses a variety of words to refer to the female characters (such as *pucele*, *dameisele*, or *dame*), but rarely mentions them by their name, and in changing spellings. For example, in *Cligès*, “Fénice” appears 32 times and “Thessala” appears 25 times. In *Yvain*, Lunette is mentioned by name 14 times, and Laudine once, during the wedding.⁵⁷ Although there is no way to know if this was a conscious choice of the author, I believe that it represents the importance of the characters in the tales. While I did not count their names, in both romances the eponymous characters’ names appear – as can be expected – on almost every page. It is essential, however, to specify that this aspect varies depending on the manuscript. First, the numbering of verses changes from one manuscript to the other. For example, in *Cligès*, the death of Alexandre happens on verse 2604 in the manuscript used for the *Pléiade* edition and takes place on verse 2578 in the manuscript used for the *Livre de Poche* edition. More importantly, not all manuscripts name specific characters in the same fashion. A significant illustration of that fact is the mention of the name “Laudine”: not all copies of the romance refer to her as such. Finding it is an often-forgotten question, Alfred

⁵⁶ Grace M. Armstrong, “Enide and Fenice: Chrétien de Troyes’s Clerkly Heroines,” p. 7.

⁵⁷ These numbers are taken from the Guiot manuscripts, as shown in the *Pléiade* edition of the tales.

Foulet and Karl Uitti examined the problem of her name. “No fewer than ten MSS contain a text of Yvain’s marriage, but these split into two redactions when it comes to v. 4. Only three MSS read: *Prise a Laudine de Landuc*, while the other seven offer: *Prise a la dame de Landuc*.”⁵⁸ They discuss various reasons and explanations for this disparity, but make very clear that they “enter upon a terrain of conjecture and pure hypothesis; no definite proof of what [they] shall offer here subsequently is forthcoming. Neither of [them] claims that [their] following arguments are watertight.”⁵⁹ While I maintain that the recurrence of certain names may indicate a greater significance of these characters, the case of Laudine proves such an interpretation must be done cautiously.

Conclusion: losing the gift of agency

With *Cligès* and *Yvain*, Chrétien accomplishes a remarkable task: he explores ways to show female characters with agency without the need to reproduce violence. Indeed, unlike Philomena, the ladies in these two romances are able to obtain and use that quality typically associated with masculinity but manage to do so without mimicking typical male behavior. Fénice, Thessala, Laudine and Lunette do not fight, do not kill; they retain their feminine attributes and still assert their autonomy. I would like to point out, however, that Chrétien’s feat is two-sided: while he seemingly attempts to depict independent and empowered female characters, he takes it all back in the end as if to appease his readers. He reassures them that what they have just read is exceptional, by removing the little freedom he gave them, or by condemning their actions in subtle ways, or even by making them seem foolish.

⁵⁸ Foulet and Uitti, “Chrétien’s ‘Laudine’: Yvain, vv. 2148-55”, p. 294.

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 297.

In the end of *Cligès*, Fénice is married, which I argue is akin to a loss of freedom as it places a woman under the control of her husband. Additionally, Fénice is depicted as concerned with her reputation: she refuses to lose her virginity to Alis because she doesn't love him and does not want to be like Iseut. As Joan Task Grimbert remarks, while her motives for tricking Alis appear admirable (not wanting to give her body to a man who does not have her heart and fearing to produce a child who would disinherit Cligès), "What is not particularly admirable, on the other hand, is that she is clearly concerned first and foremost with her reputation."⁶⁰ Examining her speech to Cligès, Grimbert adds that Fénice "then goes on to warn Cligès that he will never have her body unless she can be spirited away from Alis without ever being found and without incurring public reproach."⁶¹ Indeed, she goes to great lengths to remain pure for Cligès; however, as soon as she is free from her marriage and behind closed doors, it seems that pre-marital sexual relations do not cause her trouble. I would argue that while Chrétien portrays her as having agency, he also gives a shallow aspect to her character. In this way, he discredits her in the eye of the reader. Furthermore, the epilogue tells us that Fénice's duplicity is not without consequences and is said to affect the lives of future empresses. As Uitti remarks: "However, from this date on, the romance informs us, Greek emperors keep very close watch of their wives!"⁶² Her happiness, therefore, comes at the cost of the freedom for other women. In the end, Fénice becomes what she fears: a negative example for all women, unwillingly following Iseut's footsteps.

As for Laudine, although we are told that she experiences a happy ending, I disagree. First, just like Fénice, she ends the romance married; however, unlike Fénice, she has married out of duty instead of true love. Roberta Krueger qualifies Laudine's love as a fiction that we are led to

⁶⁰ Grimbert, "On Fénice's Vain Attempts to Revise a Romantic Archetype and Chrétien's Fabled Hostility to the Tristan Legend," pp. 95-96.

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 98.

⁶² Uitti, p. 49.

believe in order for us to overlook the real motive for the wedding. “The implication that women really desire what necessity dictates to them conforms to [...] misogynist comments.”⁶³ The main reason she marries Yvain is indeed necessity, as reminded by her seneschal: “Une femme n’est pas faite pour porter l’écu ni manier la lance. En revanche, elle peut pallier ce manque et même le surmonter en prenant un vaillant époux.” (A woman is unable to bear a shield or strike with a lance. It is greatly to her profit and advantage to take a good husband).⁶⁴ Laudine never truly expresses love for Yvain, at least not in the way that most ladies do in romances, and especially not prior to her nuptials. Having never met the knight, she holds an imaginary conversation with Yvain in which she convinces herself that she cannot blame him for killing her husband according to the rules of chivalry.⁶⁵ Chrétien tells us that: “C’est ainsi que sa logique et son bon sens lui prouvaient à elle-même qu’elle ne devait pas le haïr. Ses paroles s’accordaient au désir de son cœur. Elle s’enflammait d’elle-même comme le feu qui fume tant et si bien que la flamme a jailli, sans aucun souffle pour l’attiser.” (Thus she proves to herself that there is justice, good sense and reason in the belief that she has no right to hate him. So her conclusion is what she would wish, and she kindles her emotions by herself like the firewood that smokes until the flame has taken hold without anyone blowing or stirring it).⁶⁶ The love she claims to feel growing finds its source in logic and previous knowledge of chivalric conventions, it can therefore be interpreted as a way to abide by society’s expectations of her gender all the while pretending it was a choice. Moreover, in the end, Chrétien takes back Laudine’s (limited) agency. Despite the fact that her crisis is resolved (she once again has a knight to defend the fountain and her land), she reconciles with

⁶³ Krueger, pp. 44-45.

⁶⁴ *Yvain*, p. 390.

⁶⁵ In this scene, we can interpret Laudine’s imaginary conversation as a sign that she has already exceeded expectations of traditional gender roles. The capacity to formulate coherent reasoning in an internalized debate with another character is typically an attribute granted to male character.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 382.

Yvain against her wishes, tricked by her servant who believes she does what is best for her lady and for the knight who once treated her with honor. I contend that, in her situation, the best – and probably only – way to retain control over her life would have been to remain a widow and endure the terrible storms provoked by the fountain. Finally, as I previously explained, Laudine is depicted as a mean, vengeful, and abusive lady. In that sense, Chrétien guarantees that she will not be regarded as a role model by women.

As for the other half of these pairs of women, Chrétien does not mention Thessala after Fénice's marriage and simply states that Lunette is happy for having established peace between her lady and Yvain. We are left to imagine what becomes of them once the romance ends. I assume that they continue with the behavior they demonstrated prior to the end, each using what agency they possess for themselves to assist their ladies as best they can. However, it is also plausible to imagine that they both lose their agency when their ladies do.

In the end, Chrétien gives the reader themes to reflect on, notably whether female agency is good or bad. I suggest that he tells us to pay attention to the contexts in which agency is granted, and to the manners in which it is employed. As I mentioned at the beginning of this conclusion, the ladies in these two romances do not use physical violence to obtain what they want; however, they manipulate the people around them in many ways. Is he insinuating that noble ladies shouldn't have agency? Based on what he shows us, I would argue that the answer is yes. As readers, we witness ladies gaining agency when faced with problems, but they then use their exceptional attribute for very selfish motives. On the contrary, the confidantes appear to have some form of agency before the tales begin. However, they are shown to employ this feature in line with their social position, that is to say to serve their ladies in any way they can. Unlike for Fénice and Laudine, Chrétien does not tell us in detail what happens to Thessala and Lunette at the end of the

tales. However, whether or not they retain their agency may be considered irrelevant as their social status means they are not in the public eye, and therefore not a threat to traditional gender roles.

Chapter 3. Female Agency in Disguise: Cross-Dressing in *Le Roman de Silence*

in short, a man's life
was much better than that of a woman.
"Indeed," he said, "it would be too bad
to step down when I'm on top.
If I'm on top, why should I step down?
-- Heldris de Cornouailles
Le Roman de Silence

Unlike Chrétien de Troyes, about whose life we can make a number of assumptions with a certain level of confidence, very little is known about the author of *Le Roman de Silence*. In fact, the only piece of information we have is a name: "Maistres Heldris de Cornuaille" introduces himself at the beginning of his text, thus establishing a personal connection to the literary universe of Arthurian legends.¹ Indeed, while it is likely a pseudonym, the name

joue avec l'imaginaire arthurien : il n'est que de penser au duc de Cornouailles qui fut l'époux malheureux de la mère d'Arthur, ou aux célèbres amants de Cornouailles, Tristan et Iseut... Heldris confirme sa connivance avec cette terre de légendes en consacrant précisément son roman aux aventures de Cador, héritier du comté de Cornouailles, puis de sa fille, Silence.²

We imagine that Heldris must have been familiar with these legends and stories and may have lived in their supposed locations. The language of the text (Old French with many Picard features) seems to indicate that the romance was written in the second half of the 12th century and that the author had connections to northern France.

Additionally, although it is generally assumed that the author is male, we cannot rule out a female author with absolute certainty and are left, here again, with questions, as Roche-Mahdi articulates: "Is the author, like the heroine, a transvestite she? Or does he just want to make us

¹ The author's name is transcribed as "Heldris of Cornwall" in modern English and as "Heldris de Cornouailles" in modern French. I will refer to him as "Heldris" from this point on.

² Florence Bouchet discusses the name of the author in the introduction to her translation (p. 461).

think so?”³ The themes evoked in this story, as we will see, can indeed lead the reader to wonder about the gender of the author – both birth gender and chosen identity.

In the first modern edition of the romance, Lewis Thorpe concludes his presentation of the author admitting the knowledge he shares is mostly conjecture:

If what I have written is accepted, then Heldris de Cornuälle is established as a professional lay poet of the second half of the thirteenth century, who lived in all probability near the present-day frontier between France and Belgium, where Nord marches with Hainaut, but who had some connexion yet to be determined either with the Duchy of Cornwall or with Cornouaille or with the hamlet La Cornuaille and who at the same time had some reason for featuring Château-Landon and Beaumont-en-Gâtinais in his poem. His artistic impulses are sound enough, as we shall see, even if the finished product is not without blemish. Parts of the Arthurian prose-Vulgate are well-known to him, he can refer competently to the Bible and to well-known vernacular poems when he wishes, and his subject-matter implies a knowledge of the works of Wace and Geoffrey of Monmouth.⁴

Through the introductions by various editors of *Le Roman de Silence* we see many conjectures about Heldris de Cornouailles. All editors analyze his language, his apparent familiarity of different aspects of life, including his historical and literary allusions. The editors then cross-reference this data with our accepted knowledge of the thirteenth century to infer a plausible life for the author.

The overall scarcity of information concerning the author may be due to the lack of interest in his work. Gina Psaki asserts that there is a correlation between the success of the text and the fame of its author:

Neither Heldris nor his work is attested in any medical document, historical or literary. The utter void surrounding his name is appropriate to the particular itinerary of his text, whose very name proclaims its non-reception history from the Middle Ages on. Silence contains references to various texts previous and contemporary to it [...], but the lines of influence run only one way: no echo of Silence has, to my knowledge, been registered in medieval French narrative, nor is it a presence in medievalist scholarship.⁵

³ Sara Roche-Mahdi, p. xi, n.2.

⁴ Lewis Thorpe, p. 17.

⁵ Gina Psaki, p. x.

According to her, as *Le Roman de Silence* had very little (if any) impact on the minds of its time and, despite its originality, “sank without discernible trace in its literary milieu,”⁶ very little would be known about “Maistres Heldris de Cornuälle,” author of a forgotten text.

In this Arthurian romance,⁷ we discover the tale of Silence, daughter of Count Cadour who decides to raise his child as a boy after the king has declared that women cannot inherit property. Silence spends his youth as a male, living through traditionally male adventures: he runs away with minstrels to learn their trade, he serves in his king’s court, he trains and becomes a great knight, and he is victorious in battle. In addition to these traditional manifestations of masculinity, Silence also faces a number of crises throughout his early life. At the age of twelve, his father announces that he was born a girl and explains his decision to fool the world into thinking he had a male heir. Silence is then the object of a fight between Nature and Nurture, allegories who intervene in Silence’s life and claim the child for themselves, leaving him to question his life. Although he eventually decides to continue with his life as a male, being a beautiful young man is the cause of his torment at King Evan’s court. Queen Eufeme, whose marriage to King Evan is described in the first part of the tale, having fallen in love with Silence, and lusting after him, repeatedly attempts to destroy his reputation and have him killed after he rejects her advances. The protagonist’s true identity is revealed after the queen’s last trick fails: the king sentences her to death for her treason, re-establishes women’s right to inherit, makes Silence embody her gender as given by Nature, and finally marries her.

⁶ Ibid, p. xii.

⁷ In her introduction, Gina Psaki also comments on the “Arthurian” quality of *Le Roman de Silence*: “While medievalists worked within a fairly stable generic category labeled “Arthurian Romance,” of which Chrétien was the touchstone and Malory the dissolution, they could not see an Arthurian romance with a cross-dressing heroine as its knight errant. While critics held stable assumptions regarding misogyny as the default mode, the unreflective reflex, of medieval literature, they could not make room for a text in which Nature and Nurture take the stage as allegorical personae and quarrel over which of the two determines character, destiny, and true gender. [...] As an Arthurian romance it is marginal, [...] no Arthurian scholar found it compelling.” pp. xv-xvii.

As previously explained, I define a crisis as an extremely difficult or dangerous situation that, when reaching its most crucial point, forces the fictional characters to take action and make a decisive change in order to escape the predicament they find themselves in. Silence, just like the female protagonists in chapters 1 and 2, finds herself facing a crisis that eventually leads her to discover and explore her agency.

In *Le roman de Silence*, the heroine's crisis can be foreseen early in the story, before she is even born. It all begins when two knights married to twin sisters both claim that their wife is the firstborn as they covet the women's inheritance. In trying to settle their disagreement, they dual to their death. King Evan, saddened by the loss of his men, decrees that women can no longer inherit property.

In creating such a situation, Heldris bases his story on what he observes in society, anchoring it – as far as we can prove – in historical facts. By the 13th century, daughters inheriting property from their fathers were not the norm. In the feudal system, landholders had an obligation to fight in the name of their lord. Because women were not trained to fight and to become warriors, they could not fulfill this essential obligation and appeared as weak landholders. Typically, then, the land and the patrimony were passed down to male heirs. Moreover, beginning in the 12th century, families were increasingly concerned with the continuity of their lineage and with the protection of their property, leading to the prevalence of the system of “primogeniture” – meaning the eldest son would inherit first and other sons received collateral goods. This concern grew even more with “the increasing power and assertiveness of kings in the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries” as “any sign of vulnerability, such as a female landholder, could lead to seizure of family properties and their consolidation into the ever-expanding royal domain.”⁸

⁸ *A History of Their Own: Women in Europe from Prehistory to the Present, Volume I*, p. 320.

Although this situation favored male heirs, the ambitions of certain families benefited some women as “in the absence of sons, daughters were identified first by lineage and only secondly by gender,”⁹ these families preferred to pass down their properties to their daughters rather than have it seized by the king. In some of these cases, “a father passed land to his daughter [...] on the occasion of her marriage while he was still alive to ensure her claim.”¹⁰

In addition to these inheritance practices that Heldris may have observed in his immediate environment, we can imagine that he also knew about exceptional women rulers who were allowed to inherit despite their birth gender. Two women in particular whose lives prove women are capable of more than their traditionally assigned roles are relevant here as their rule concerned both France and England, where Silence’s story takes place, and lived only about a century before Heldris’ presumed time: Matilda of England and Eleanor of Aquitaine. Henry I designated the former – his daughter – as his heir after his son died, and had his vassals swear fealty to her. Upon his death, her inheritance was challenged, and she fought to preserve her kingdom until her son became King of England as Henry II. Similarly, William X of Aquitaine made provisions for his daughter’s – and his legacy’s – protection after the death of his son. Eleanor of Aquitaine inherited her family’s power and wealth when Louis VI – appointed her protector by her father before his death – married her to his son, Louis VII. Throughout her life and her two marriages – she married Henry II, Matilda of England’s son, after being granted an annulment of her first marriage – she fought to protect not only her own but also to ensure her lineage’s inheritance. In the end these women’s “traditional function and role proved to be significant. Matilda and Eleanor of Aquitaine bore sons. [...] It was as mothers and the bearers of the legitimate progeny that even the most

⁹ Ibid., p. 299.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 320.

enterprising and courageous women best served Europe's warrior and landed elite."¹¹ It is not surprising, therefore, to find texts concerned with issues of inheritance and particularly those raised by the gender of the elite's children.

The situation in *Le Roman de Silence* is, then, not an unusual one at first: before the death of the dueling knights, there were no formal interdictions against female heirs receiving their family's property. The only obstacles were tradition and practical concerns, which families found ways to counteract in times of need. Heldris was, presumably, aware of these various possibilities, if only because he models one of these unusual situations in his *romance*. When discussing his desire to marry Cador and Eufemie (Silence's parents) to each other, King Evan clearly states that, should they agree, they would receive the maiden's family land and makes sure to specify that she is an only child:

if they were to reach an agreement at this time,
it would be a very good idea, it seems to me,
to give then a thousand pounds a year,
I would grant them this myself,
and the territory of Cornwall
upon the death of Renald, without fail.
She is his daughter, he is her father;
she is her parents' only child.¹²

Despite having banned women from inheriting, he is willing to bestow her father's property on Eufemie because she will share ownership with her husband. Cador will instantly become the new Count of Cornwall upon his father in law's death, thus safeguarding against a situation similar to that of the two dueling knights.

¹¹ Ibid., pp. 299-304.

¹² *Silence: a Thirteenth-Century French Romance*. Translated by Sarah Roche-Mahdi, pp. 61-63. Although the romance was written in French, it has received more attention from scholars in North America than in France. There is only one edition of *Silence* in modern French, and it is not easily available in the United States. For that reason, I am using Roche-Mahdi English translation.

In light of the historical context and of this first segment of the tale, I would argue that the author made an educated and conscious decision when imagining the King's prohibition. He chose to create a plot for Silence that mirrored the most common outcome (women unable to inherit), while excluding the possibility of exceptions (women inheriting and successfully maintaining their property). In doing so, he ultimately gave himself the opportunity to write the story of an extraordinary heroine.

When Eufemie becomes pregnant with his child, Cador recalls King Ebain's decree and becomes worried he will not have a son

My dear [Eufemie], I am deeply concerned
about the possibility that the child we have engendered
might turn out to be female
(if God allows it to be born),
and that King Evan may not allow
women to inherit
as long as he lives, because of the damage done
to two counts by twin girls,
through which females have lost so much.¹³

As we can see, Cador fears having a daughter only out of concern for the continuity of his property. Indeed, he recalls the story that led his King to bar women from inheriting. When two counts married twin sisters, each claimed his wife was the oldest in hopes of receiving the land upon the death of the women's father. When they could not reach a compromise, they decided to settle their argument with a duel, which resulted in their deaths'. Grief for his men made King Evan so upset, he declared that "no woman shall ever inherit again / in the kingdom of England / as long as [he reigns] over the land."¹⁴ Planning for the future, Cador immediately conceives a strategy to circumvent the law: regardless of the sex of the baby, they will announce, in front of witnesses,

¹³ Ibid., p. 81.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 17.

the birth of a son. He then shares his plan with Eufemie, who agrees to go along with it when he explains his reasoning:

For if we have a daughter,
she won't get a single shred
of our earthly possessions,
unless we arrange things so
cleverly and secretly
that nobody finds out what we're up to.
We will raise her as a boy,
watch her closely and keep her covered up.
Thus we will be able to make her our heir;
no one will be able to challenge it.¹⁵

His decision is at the origin of Silence's crisis: by stripping her at birth of the characteristics traditionally assigned to her sex and assigning her male characteristics, he not only disrupts the sex-gender system but he also creates the conditions for her to have an extraordinary life. The result of Cador's fear sets up the scene for his child's crisis, but also eventually becomes the source of her future agency.

There are two facets to Cador's action: on the one hand, it can be understood as an act of love and altruism, and on the other it is the behavior one can expect from a father and head of the family in the Middle Ages.

When Cador first appears in the story, Heldris introduces him as "Cador the brave, an accomplished youth. He was the bravest knight of all, the best-loved and most valiant."¹⁶ Based on this introduction, we can imagine that such an incredible young man would go to great lengths to hide the sex of his child and trick his King, even though the latter may not agree with Cador's reasoning and deem his actions treachery. One can therefore think that he is a generous and kind

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 83.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 21.

father who only has his daughter's best interest at heart and simply wants her to be able to enjoy her parents' possessions and receive them after they die.

As aforementioned, noble families were greatly troubled by the continuity of their lineage and, consequently, with the transmission of their property to their descendants. In this respect, Cadour's actions reflect typical attitudes of the 13th century. He is concerned about Silence's welfare, particularly because Renald of Cornwall – Eufemie's father – mentioned bearing a male heir as a strict condition to inherit his property:

he took Cadour to the King
and invested him then and there
with whatever he held in fief,
provided his daughter should have an heir.
If she died without an heir, it should go
to the rightful claimant.¹⁷

This new requirement, combined with the fact that women are prohibited from inheriting, means that Cadour's only recourse to remain in possession of his land is to raise Silence as a male heir. The deception, therefore, is beneficial to his family as a whole: he receives the title and property directly from the older Count of Cornwall, but both his wife and child and future generations can profit from the land and its privileges.

Keeping in mind King Evan's law, Cadour discusses with his wife the possibility of a future child while scheming to hide Silence's gender

Dearest, I want to disguise her,
as you heard me say before.
I want to make a male of a female.
Think about it, dearest love,
for there is no way we can know
if we will ever have a son.
We can't be sure of it,
and if we have one, by any chance,
we'll turn this one back into a girl.
That way, no one can accuse us

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 75.

of treason or felony,
or wickedness or villainy.¹⁸

With this added provision to his ruse, Cador further exemplifies the century's worry about inheritance. While he plans to raise his daughter as a son in order to receive Renald's property, he also retains the option to make Silence assume her birth gender should he be blessed with a male heir in the future, so as to protect his lineage and in the meantime maintain his public image and remain in the King's good favors. By doing so, he would completely turn her life upside down, but, in a sense, he would give her the opportunity to live life as intended by society. The couple, however, is never blessed with another child, making Silence the only heir to Cornwall's fief.

Soon after his daughter's birth, Cador takes measures to conceal his deception. With the assistance of two trusted accomplices (a female cousin who helped Eufemie give birth and a loyal seneschal of the late Count Renald), he arranges for Silence to be raised in the woods, away from society so that no one "might discover the child's nature, or the child might accidentally do something to reveal its sex."¹⁹ Silence is brought up as a boy from the very beginning of her life, unaware of her parents' scheme and her true identity

When the child was of an age to wear clothing,
in order to deny her nature,
they took care to dress her in male clothing
made to her measure.²⁰

By creating a situation in which his child is forced to grow up against what Nature intended for her, Cador inadvertently became responsible for Silence's atypical life in regard to traditional gender roles.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 97.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 107.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 111.

As Simone de Beauvoir famously declared in 1949, “On ne naît pas femme : on le devient. Aucun destin biologique, psychique, économique ne définit la figure que revêt au sein de la société la femelle humaine; c’est l’ensemble de la civilisation qui élabore ce produit intermédiaire entre le mâle et le castrat qu’on qualifie de féminin. Seule la médiation d’autrui peut constituer un individu comme *Autre*.”²¹ Although the philosopher’s work focused on the place of women in society, I contend that her theory can be applied to both sexes: just as no child is born a woman, no child is born a man. This binary system is instilled in children as they grow up and develop in society. While discussing the linguistic aspects of the term *gender*, Teresa de Lauretis remarks: “Although a child does have a sex from “nature,” it isn’t until it becomes (i.e., until it is signified as) a boy or girl that it acquires a gender.”²² The two authors agree that, while children are born with anatomical differences, these differences do not dictate a specific path for their development or predict what they will become. Lauretis continues:

What the popular wisdom knows, then, is that gender is not sex, a state of nature, but the representation of each individual in terms of a particular social relation which pre-exists the individual and is predicated on the *conceptual* and rigid (structural) opposition of two biological sexes. This conceptual structure is what feminist social scientists have designated “the sex-gender system.”²³

Based on these notions, it clearly appears that individuals have to learn this system – whether they acquire it by mimicking the behaviors they observe in their environment or by being educated by their older peers or caretakers.

Thinking about Silence’s birth and early life in light of sex-gender ideology helps us understand the direction that the protagonist’s life takes from its very commencement. Silence is described as a child raised outside of society and unaware of the sex-gender system that assigns

²¹ Simone de Beauvoir, *Le deuxième sexe. II L’expérience vécue*, p. 13.

²² Teresa de Lauretis, *Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film, and Fiction*, p. 5.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 5. (her emphasis)

cultural meaning to individuals.²⁴ Silence, consequently, grows up ignorant of his biological truth and oblivious to the fact that he would be considered unnatural in the eyes of society. While I mainly look at Silence's progression through the traditional binary lens of male/female and man/woman, gender in the Middle Ages was more complex than this duality. The recent growing scholarship devoted to transgender lives in the Middle Ages²⁵ shows that although different gender identities were not theorized until the late 20th century, transgender people are not a modern creation but have existed for hundreds of centuries. Medieval authors have discussed and explored these issues in their work, whether writing about real people or characters in fiction.²⁶ Silence's story, therefore, may not have been quite as shocking to a medieval audience as one might think today.

In spite of his atypical upbringing, Silence receives an exemplary education from his nurse and excels in all aspects of a boy's training. As we can see, Cadore's cousin who served as Silence's nurse not only instilled the best moral values possible, but taught him in such a way that, combined with his nature, led to the child teaching himself to the point of surpassing his peers

She instructed him, taught him principles
of good conduct, to honor
both great and humble.
She taught and instructed him very well.
The child was not ungrateful;
he was very glad of such learning –
that was the effect of his good nature.
The child's innate qualities were such
that he taught himself.
You have often been told

²⁴ Lauretis more precisely defines the *sex-gender system* as a sociocultural construct according to which we assign meaning – such as male or female – to individuals. According to her, a culture's meanings differ based on its social values and hierarchies.

²⁵ See the *Medieval Feminist Forum's* special issue titled "Visions of Medieval Trans Feminism" (Volume 55, number 1, 2019) and in particular the introduction by editors Bychowski and Kim in which they discuss the various panels at medieval conferences which resulted from this growing interest. <https://ir.uiowa.edu/mff/vol55/iss1/>

²⁶ Gabrielle Bychowski discusses several examples of transgender lives in the medieval period in her article for the Public Medievalist website "Were there Transgender People in the Middle Ages?" <https://www.publicmedievalist.com/transgender-middle-ages/>

that a good falcon trains himself,
and this child learned more by himself
than anyone else his age.²⁷

With such praise for the child's achievements, Heldris subtly prepares the reader for Silence's future accomplishments. One can easily imagine that Silence, having excelled at a young age, will become equally successful in all his endeavors. Additionally, the reader is told that he rapidly exceeds expectations and surpasses all the other children in the land:

I will tell you this much about Silence:
just as he was the most beautiful of all,
he was more valiant and noble
than all the others put together²⁸

By insisting on Silence's superiority, Heldris also instills the idea that the protagonist will not only be successful but will also outshine his peers and become the best in any field he might enter.

I would argue that this passage foretells the debate between Nature and Nurture: while the narrator describes the quality of Silence's education, he also highlights the fact that his ability to learn is "the effect of his good nature" and his "innate qualities." We can see already a correlation between the two sides of Silence's character, to which I will return later.

Due to Silence's upbringing as a perfect boy, the revelation of his true anatomy only serves to accentuate his masculinity. Upon explaining the circumstances that led to concealing Silence's genital identity, Cador appeals to his child's good qualities and asks that he protect their secret:

Now, son, you know the whole situation.
As you cherish honor,
you will continue to conceal yourself from everyone.²⁹

Once again, Cador demonstrates his fear that his lineage will lose the privilege of his title and land. By referring to honor, he draws on values instilled in Silence, hoping his child will match his desire

²⁷ *Silence*, p. 113.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 115.

to protect the family's name and property. As he accepts honoring his father's wish, Silence already exhibits the qualities that will help him become a great knight later in his life.³⁰

From then on, Cador, Eufemie, the nurse, and the seneschal all take action to develop Silence's masculinity, particularly in regard to his physical appearance and practical skills.

Despite having discovered that his existence is vastly different from any other female-born child in the country, Silence's childhood remains uneventful as he continues with his education in his isolated life. It is only when he reaches the age of twelve³¹ that his perception of himself and his knowledge of the world are challenged. The first sign of the crisis Silence experiences takes the shape of his conscience pointing out the deception he's carrying out, as he bests all his peers at activities such as wrestling or jousting. This is when the two allegories, Nature and Nurture, visit Silence. They argue about whose role is the most important in his existence and each tries to convince him that she is right.

This fight between the allegories over Silence's body and soul, I contend, allows him to fully realize the contradiction between his anatomy and his upbringing, forcing him to question his past and consider his future with a new perspective. This difficult situation is the crisis that leads Silence to discover his agency. Now aware of his true nature, he is faced with a crucial decision: abide by the rules dictated by his body or follow his education. In this instance, agency is portrayed as the ability to choose between two conflicting paths that can completely alter the character's life. Silence displays such a characteristic as he examines his options and makes a decision based on the results of analysis.

³⁰ Although the author sometimes alternates the pronouns, I will keep the use of the masculine he/him/his as long as Silence's assumed identity is male.

³¹ The text does not specify how much time passes between Cador's discussion with Silence and the time the protagonist begins questioning his identity. We can assume, however, that the two events are separated by a few years as Silence continues his education with the seneschal and is said to have improved: "by the time he was in his twelfth year, /none was his master any more." p. 117.

Heldris, therefore, uses the allegories of Nature and Nurture as characters who play a central role in Silence's life; they represent opposite ideals, both trying to convince the protagonist that they provide the best path to follow. Nature is the first to appear in Silence's journey, as upon learning that Eufémie is pregnant with Silence, Cador prays to God for a safe pregnancy and evokes Nature's diligence in molding his child: "and let Nature have neglected nothing/ when she molded this fruit into human shape."³² The author gives his readers a first sign announcing that Nature will play an important role in bringing Silence into the world.

This first mention is quickly followed by a detailed explanation of Nature's commitment to making Cador and Eufémie's child the most beautiful creature ever seen. As soon as the author reveals that a girl was born, he announces "She was a triumph of Nature's art"³³ and proceeds to meticulously describe the allegory's work. Her process is compared to that of a bread maker who carefully selects his tools and his ingredients, separating them to save the finest flour from the coarse bran "when he wants to make beautiful white bread."³⁴ When Nature makes people and wants to create a masterpiece:

She first prepares her raw material.
Before starting to work, she breaks it up
and purifies it and cleans it,
and when she has broken it into little pieces,
she separates the fine from the coarse.
She always makes quality folk from
the refined clay, and riff-raff from the coarse.³⁵

This process is what Nature then follows when preparing to create Silence: she uses the most beautiful and purest raw materials she possesses, as well as a mold she has kept aside and never used before. She is hard at work, as the author tells us in great length, paying attention to every

³² *Silence*, p. 79.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 87.

detail – the hair, the ears, the eyebrows, the color of the face, the mouth... every part of the body is mentioned – and creates her greatest work ever: “never, in truth lived a more beautiful creature/ in this world, nor was anything more lovely ever born.”³⁶

This meticulous presentation of Nature’s work of art, to which Heldris dedicates nearly two hundred verses, can be interpreted as a hint about the allegory’s role in Silence’s life later on, as well as to her reaction when she realizes what has been done to her perfect creation. Indeed, when she realizes that she has been tricked by Cador and Eufémie, Nature is enraged and feels insulted that they would act “as if the work of Nuture were superior to [hers].”³⁷ As the author writes her outburst of fury, he clearly hints at a future argument between the two allegories, as Nature announces “If I don’t unmask her in the long run,/ Nuture’s power will be proven/ stronger than mine”³⁸ Although the narration leaves the allegory to focus on Silence’s childhood, the reader already knows to expect that the opposition of nature and education (culture) will be a central debate in the child’s development.

The allegories do not appear in Silence’s life until he reaches puberty³⁹ and starts questioning his identity. Although he has understood his parents’ decision and agreed to maintain his masculine appearance and life, the knowledge that his body and lifestyle don’t match starts troubling him: “Silence was deeply disturbed about this,/ for her conscience told her/ that she was practicing deception by doing this.”⁴⁰ This is the moment Nature chooses to interfere with Silence’s contradictory upbringing by chastising the young teenager. The allegory reprimands Silence for “conducting [himself] like a man” and ruining the work she did “when [she] heaped all

³⁶ Ibid., p. 93.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 107.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 109.

³⁹ Katherine Terrell mentions that it is at that time that “the relationship of gendered social roles to physical sex becomes even more muddled,” p. 39.

⁴⁰ *Silence*, p. 117.

the beauty [she] had stored up/ upon [Silence] alone.”⁴¹ She points out potential repercussions of Silence’s deception:

And there are a thousand women in this world
who are madly in love with you
because of the beauty they see in you –
you don’t suppose they think something’s there
that was never part of your equipment at all?
There are those who love you now
who would hate you with all their hearts
if they knew what you really are!⁴²

In her analysis of the passage, Roberta Krueger points out that Nature has multiple meanings: biological sex, moral temperament, class-bound character, and the status quo of gender roles. She concludes:

In other words (from a modern critical perspective), “nature” is the justification of how “culture” constructs women. The Nature/Nature conflict opposes not sex to gender, but two models of gender to each other; one is “natural” because it is socially acceptable, and one is unnatural because it goes against the grain.⁴³

Indeed, what Nature is furious about is not only the destruction of her masterpiece but also Silence and his parents’ disregard for traditional gender roles. She tells Silence that he has “no business going off into the forest,/ jousting, hunting, shooting off arrows” and that he must “go to a chamber and learn to sew! That’s what Nature’s usage wants of you!”⁴⁴ There, the allegory mentions the protagonist’s name, concluding that he is not Silentius, in reference to Cador’s plan to name his child in a certain way that could be easily altered should the truth be revealed and should Silence revert to his birth gender later in life.

⁴¹ Ibid., pp. 117-119.

⁴² Ibid., p. 118.

⁴³ Krueger, “Women readers and the politics of gender in *Le Roman de Silence*,” p. 117.

⁴⁴ *Silence*, p. 119.

At first, Silence's reaction is to reject all of Nature's claims: his identity has never been challenged in such a way and he maintains that he can only be Silentius, and does not know who else he could be:

Silentius is my name, I think,
or I am other than who I was.
But this I know well, upon my oath,
that I cannot be anybody else!
Therefore I am Silentius,
as I see it, or I am no one.⁴⁵

In reaffirming his identity, he recalls the oath made to his father that he would conceal his gender and protect his family's honor. Life as a male is all he knows, and he expresses the idea that if Silentius is not his name or who he is, then he has no other identity.

This initial outburst of conviction is only short-lived, and quickly Silence starts giving credit to Nature's argument and questions what he knows: "she convinced herself/ [...] that because the -us was contrary to usage,/ her name was not Silentius."⁴⁶ Silence finds that Nature's declaration starts making sense and begins to agree with the allegory, finding in himself a new desire to learn to sew, and to stop cultivating unnatural "savage ways" only to protect his inheritance.

Immediately after Silence begins to agree with Nature, Nurture arrives and asks to know what is happening. Silence reports to the opposing allegory that he has been scolded for his way of life and exposes his new reasoning. He announces that he will not wear men's clothing anymore, nor keep his hair short. Silence expresses a fear of being mocked or discovered by his peers:

Now, when I get dressed,
and don't participate
in the kinds of games that boys are used to,
all my companions jeer [...]
Whenever I happen to get undressed,

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

I am afraid my sex will be discovered.⁴⁷

We can see here that Nature's scolding came at a time where Silence had already been doubting his way of life, as it had become more complicated to participate in some activities while maintaining his secret. He reiterates his new desire to adopt a woman's life, as he announces that his torment has been caused by greed and that the Lord will help him find his way to his natural path.

Upon hearing these words, Nurture becomes furious with Nature. Nurture is also proud of her accomplishments with Silence's upbringing and is concerned that the child might revert to a girl's life – Nurture does not believe that birth should dictate one's destiny. Indeed, Nature "wishes to claim that gender roles are inherently linked to the sex of the body, whereas Nurture wishes to claim that gender is independent of sex."⁴⁸ Nurture, who represents a freedom that Nature denies, threatens to corrupt other people in the same way that she has taken Silence:

I have completely dis-natured her.
She will always resist you.
If you don't stop haunting her,
you'll have small reason for vanity left,
if I make a thousand people
work against their nature through nurture.⁴⁹

The author specifically uses the term "dis-natured" ("desnaturee" in the original Old French text) to signify that Silence's education has not only transformed her but distanced, separated her from her nature.

The two enemies are joined in their debate by Reason, yet another allegory, who sides with Nurture and argues that abandoning her way of life to return to her nature would equate to death. She supports her point of view with specific examples of what Silence would lose:

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 121.

⁴⁸ Terrell, p. 39.

⁴⁹ *Silence*, p. 123.

you will never train for knighthood afterwards,
You will lose your horse and chariot.
Do not think the king will go back on his word
and acknowledge you as rightful heir,
when he finds out your true nature.⁵⁰

In order to convince Silence that listening to Nurture is best for him, Reason appeals to the habits the boy formed during his childhood and to his ambitions. Reason's intervention is a tipping point: Silence begins to contemplate the pastimes and customs of a woman and compares them to the life he has led so far as a man. He comes to the conclusion that a man's life is better than a woman's and that he would have a hard time converting if he chose to do so:

"Indeed," he said, "it would be too bad
to step down when I'm on top.
If I'm on top, why should I step down?"⁵¹

He then considers the fact that, after years spent outdoors engaging in male activities, his body is too rough to be that of a woman's. Silence also keeps his oath to his father in mind, as he refuses to dishonor him. He puts an end to the allegories' debate with this final declaration:

I don't want to lose my high position;
I don't want to exchange it for a lesser,
and I don't want to prove my father a liar.
I would rather have God strike me dead!
Whatever Nature may do,
I will never betray the secret!

Despite Nature's hard work to create the most perfect girl and her efforts to retrieve her masterpiece, Silence will retain his masculine ways.

After hearing all three allegories' arguments, Silence is able to make a conscious and educated decision. I contend that it is in that precise moment that Silence discovers agency. Being at the center of the debate among the allegories, after having doubted the value of his existence,

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 125.

allows Silence to fully understand society's expectations of gender roles. This puts him in a privileged position: he can weigh the positive and negative aspects of life for each gender and decide for himself the path he wants to take.

Heldris here portrays female agency as being only possible in the context of cross-dressing. Through Silence's comparison of gender roles and the opportunities brought by each, the author clearly announces that, in this society, women have very little freedom and are limited to indoor activities whereas men are free to go wherever they want and have the power to choose their destiny. Now that he has established the conditions in which a female character can have agency – cross-dressing behavior – Heldris shows us how she explores and takes advantage of this privilege. By becoming first a minstrel and then a knight – two typically male occupations – Silence further distances himself from his nature.

Soon after asserting his identity, Silence has another encounter that will change his life. Two minstrels who had just been at the court of Count Cadore seek refuge for the night and ask the seneschal in charge of Silence's education for hospitality. To thank their host, they showcase their music, consequently introducing the young teenager to their art. Silence, still shaken by the allegories' intervention despite his firm decision to live as a male, contemplates what would happen to him should the king die and women be allowed to inherit again. His conscience tells him that, in such a situation, he would be embarrassed to find himself unknowledgeable of women's ways. On the other hand, should Silence maintain his masculine ways for a long period of time, he would become a knight but be embarrassed, for his body would not be able to endure hardships like other men. His conscience advises him to go abroad with the minstrels and learn their trade. This way, if he excels neither at knighthood nor at women's occupations, he will at least have learned the art of music. In essence, Silence is faced with the reality that his nature might

be an impediment to his life as a man and that his education – or nurture – might be an impediment to his life as a woman.

In having Silence opt for a career as a troubadour, Heldris demonstrates “that an escape from binary formulations of gender is only possible where heterosexual (and patriarchally governed) reproduction ceases to be compulsory.”⁵² The world of itinerant musicians literally represents a space where such an escape is possible: by constantly traveling from one court to the next, troubadours experience a form of unsocialized freedom. Leaving the seneschal’s court and fleeing with the jongleurs enables Silence “to escape the bind of ill-fitting gender roles and to learn a craft that suits both men and women.”⁵³ In doing so, he is able to tread, if only for some time, in the space that separates Nature and Nurture without having to make an irreversible choice.

Silence, therefore, decides to leave his home and acquire a new skill by following the two jongleurs. Although he disguises his face by roughing up his complexion, the musicians quickly recognize him and decide to take him on:

And when the jongleurs knew
that it was he, they were overjoyed.
They decided then that he would go
with them and serve them;
on these terms. They would instruct him.
They promised they would take care of him,
and that they would leave the territory right away,
so that no one would come and find him there.⁵⁴

Silence’s wish is granted: he will get a chance to learn the art of minstrelsy all the while hiding his noble birth and protecting his father’s name.

⁵² Jessica Barr, "The Idea of the Wilderness: Gender and Resistance in *Le Roman de Silence*," p. 4.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 141.

His decision to listen to his conscience and follow the jongleurs to learn from them is meaningful in regard to the questions of gender and agency. While Callahan interprets Silence's choice to learn minstrelsy as "affirming her dual gender rather than choosing one or the other,"⁵⁵ I argue that it is a demonstration of the protagonist's agency. Although jongleurs⁵⁶ are traditionally portrayed as males, there were many women practicing the trade by the time Heldris de Cornouailles wrote this romance. As Edmond Faral explains: "des jongleresses suivaient les jongleurs : car, depuis longtemps déjà, les femmes s'étaient mêlées de jonglerie. De très vieilles miniatures les montrent dans le métier de danseuses et de musiciennes. Au XIIIème siècle, elles sont extrêmement répandues."⁵⁷ If women minstrels were as common as Faral's research claims, we can assume that the author would have known about it and, therefore, consciously chosen to portray Silence - born female but living as a male - in a profession where both genders were accepted. I contend that, by remaining male and choosing music as his occupation, Silence reaffirms his identity as a man. Additionally, since minstrelsy is a domain in which the separation between genders is blurred, Silence puts himself in a position where his appearance will likely not be questioned, giving him more freedom to learn the trade without fear of being discovered.

However, as Callahan also points out, music was a space where women were allowed a public voice. The author's choice to portray his protagonist in such a way can be interpreted two ways: on the one hand, he creates a situation in which a female-born character is allowed agency by choosing her gender and her own path, but on the other hand that path is one where women are typically accepted. At first glance it appears then that Heldris's portrayal of Silence is a progressive

⁵⁵ Christopher Callahan, p.123.

⁵⁶ The words "jongleur" and "minstrel" are seemingly used interchangeably in the Old French text as well as in the translation.

⁵⁷ Edmond Faral, p. 63.

one (Silence chooses to become a male jongleur), but after careful analysis it appears that he writes a more traditional story (Silence is allowed a voice in a field where women already have one).

For four years Silence travels with the two minstrels, learning from them, and eventually becoming a more accomplished musician than his teachers. He turns out to be so successful that his companions fear they will be forgotten and decide to kill him so they can keep earning money and not share their profits with Silence. Having overheard them, the youth foils their plan by offering to let them go on without him, while he journeys back to his father's land. There, he learns that, during his absence, Cador has banned all minstrels out of grief for losing his son. Silence, having been made aware of the risks, decides to play music anyway, and lets himself be taken to the Count's court. There, he appears in his disguise and is initially unrecognized until an old man exposes his true identity and he is finally reunited with his parents. Silence's first act after their reunion is to ask his father for mercy for all the minstrels who enter his land, a wish Cador happily grants to his child. Rapidly, however, they are separated again as King Evan, upon hearing of Silence's talents, makes him a part of his household. Silence spends some time at the King's court, practicing minstrelsy for the ruler, until he has unfortunate encounters with the Queen, which leads to his departure for France, and, ultimately, to a new life and a new occupation.⁵⁸

King Evan, in an attempt to soothe his angry wife, sends Silence to the King of France asking him to accept him into his court:

Tell [the king of France] that I request of him,
as his vassal,
that Silence be welcomed at his court
and made a member of his household.
He should knight him at his discretion,
at the appropriate time and place,
and keep the youth with him

⁵⁸ I will discuss Silence's encounter with Queen Eufème in a later segment.

until I ask for him, and then he should return.⁵⁹

Once again, the King is responsible for Silence's exceptional life: first by forbidding women to inherit, he led Cadore to raise his child as a boy, and now sending him away to France, he sets the stage for Silence to become a great knight.

Indeed, Silence rapidly shines at the French court and is knighted by the King of France before he turns eighteen years old. Once again, Silence outperforms his peers in all manners of fighting; so much so that should they find out his true gender, they would be terribly ashamed of their performances. His achievements and his fame are so great that King Evan, upon hearing about them, demands Silence's return to help him fight a war against rebellious knights in England. Silence immediately returns to England and runs into battle, ultimately winning the war for King Evan.

In portraying Silence as possessing all the qualities of a young noble man ("He was a valiant and noble knight", "an outstanding and accomplished knight", "Everyone knew that he was valiant, wise, and brave in word and deed."⁶⁰), Heldris accentuates Nurture's triumph over Nature:

Whoever saw him jousting, stripped of his mantle,
carrying his shield on his left arm,
charging in the tournament
with well-positioned lance,
might well say that Nurture
can do a great deal to overcome Nature,
if she can teach such behavior
to a soft and tender woman.⁶¹

⁵⁹ *Silence*, p. 203. Although this letter was switched and never reached the King of France, due to the latter's reaction I interpret King Evan's second letter as being of similar content.

⁶⁰ *Silence*, p. 243.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 241.

Despite his birth gender, Silence excels at manhood. In modern terms, Nurture's superiority can be read through the lens of Judith Butler's gender theory. According to her, gender is an act, a social performance that is agreed upon and that, as a society, we are taught to uphold:

Gender ought not to be construed as a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow; rather, gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a *stylized repetition of acts*. The effect of gender is produced through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self.⁶²

Gender, then, is not inherent to a person based on their anatomy, but is instead assimilated in the body through this process of *stylized repetition of acts*. Committing every day to the decision to dress as a male and to pursue masculine activities is a stylized repetition of acts. Silence is simply performing the gender of her choosing, despite going against the accepted norms of femininity in her society. Being a *repetition of acts* and not preexisting characteristics attached to the body, gender is actually more related to questions of nurture and education than to nature.

Silence's choice of career reflects her upbringing and education (of Nurture's involvement in her life) but is also a demonstration of her agency: both her time as an itinerant jongleur and her adventures as a knight are actions that echo her decision to live as a male. In this regard, Heldris portrays the exploration of female agency as a form of freedom distinct from traditional and socially accepted gender norms.

Living the life of a man in a female body all the while being the most beautiful creature and having such an admirable personality, Silence is confronted with problems related to the issue of gender that go beyond childhood and choice of career. As previously mentioned, soon after he is reunited with his family, Silence is summoned to King Evan's court where he meets Queen

⁶² Butler, p. 191. (Emphasis in the original text).

Eufème and faces the consequences of having a secret, non-traditional way of life. On three separate occasions, the Queen, who is “much taken with the youth/ because of his beauty and his demeanor,”⁶³ tries to seduce the protagonist. Silence rejects her, because he is afraid to tarnish his and his father’s reputation by revealing his secret and also because “he wasn’t at all interested,/ because his nature kept him from responding.”⁶⁴ While the first two instances launch Silence’s successful career as a knight, the third one leads to a public revelation of his genital identity and, subsequently, the end of the tale.

After Merlin exposes to the court Silence’s deception and the Queen’s treachery,⁶⁵ and Silence explains what led Cador to raise his child as a male, King Ébain condemns his wife, has her executed and commends the youth for being honest and loyal. Through the Queen’s shocking sentence (she was drawn and quartered) that contrasts with Silence’s praiseworthy behavior, Heldris seems to be condemning adultery. Indeed, while Merlin’s revelations exonerate Silence of any wrongdoing towards Eufeme, they make the Queen’s secret public:

These two, Silence and the nun,
are the deceivers;
you and I are the deceived.
King, this nun is Eufeme’s lover;
He is deceiving you in woman’s dress.⁶⁶

The Queen was doubly unfaithful: she not only attempted to seduce Silence, but she was also hiding her male lover in plain sight by having him present himself and dress as a nun. With their deaths (the lover is also killed), Heldris condemns adultery and male-to-female cross-dressing.

⁶³ *Silence*, p. 173.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 179.

⁶⁵ For details on Merlin’s role in the story, see for instance Sarah Roche-Mahdi “A Reappraisal of the Role of Merlin in the *Roman de Silence*,” or Lorraine Kochankse Stock “Civilization and Its Discontents: Cultural Primitivism and Merlin as a Wild Man in the *Roman de Silence*,” in *Arthuriana*, Vol. 12, No.1, 2002.

⁶⁶ *Silence*, p. 307.

After the pair's execution, the King ensures that Silence's story will not be repeated by removing the problem that started it:

Do you know what I will do for you,
so that you will never have cause for complaint –
women will be allowed to inherit again.⁶⁷

With this reward, Silence appears to no longer need to dress and live as a man and is therefore forced to reverse his choices:

They dressed Silence as a woman.
Lords, what more can I say?
Once he was called Silentius:
they removed the -us, added an -a,
and so he was called Silentia.⁶⁸

Now that Silence is publicly exposed as female, Nature reclaims her rights over the hero's body and removes all traces of the years lived as male. Once she is transformed into the beautiful woman Nature intended, the King marries her, putting an end to the tale.

By having his main character experience such a turnaround, Heldris shows the limitations in his portrayal of female agency. First, Silence overcomes the inheritance obstacle for women, but it can hardly be seen as a real victory.

Do you know what I will do for you,
so that you will never have cause for complaint–
women will be allowed to inherit again.⁶⁹

While Silence's actions do bring about social change and suggest more equality for the future, the king's phrasing makes it sound more like a pacifying action intended to prevent her from straying away from the accepted gender roles. Then, as soon as her genital and public identities are aligned, traditional gender roles are applied and Silence is, in an ironic twist, silenced (she no longer speaks

⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 311.

⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 313.

⁶⁹ *Silence*, p. 311.

and is only mentioned by the narrator in contrast to the Queen's faults). After seemingly granting his female-born hero this attribute traditionally associated with masculinity, he tells his audience that Silence could only have agency while she was living as a male.

"Is the tale ultimately misogynistic, transmitting an ultra-conservative message, or does it reveal more radical, proto-feminist tendencies? If the latter, does Heldris espouse this viewpoint, or does it result despite attempts to prove women's 'natural' inferiority?"⁷⁰ This question asked by Kristin Burr expresses my own concern about the author's goal in writing this tale. Throughout the text, Heldris expresses contradictory opinions. On the one hand, he comments on women's inferior social status through Silence's internal debate and conclusion that being male is more beneficial.⁷¹ On the other hand, he extensively comments on women's inherent bad nature, using the narrator's or characters' voices. For instance, when Cador ponders whether or not to reveal his love to Eufémie, he comments on women's capriciousness:

Yes, that's the way a woman is:
she doesn't do the best she can,
she holds her will to be reason,
she seeks occasion to dishonor herself;
her will works contrary to nature,
contrary to reason and convention.⁷²

Another example is the narrator's observations on Queen Eufème's violent reaction after being spurned by Silence for the first time:

A woman never wearies
of changing her feelings like this. [...]
When a woman is dominated by anger,
she is completely out of control.⁷³

⁷⁰ Kristin Burr, "Nurturing Debate in *Le Roman de Silence*," pp. 33-34.

⁷¹ Krueger, p. 120.

⁷² *Silence*, p. 33.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 183-185.

According to Burr, however, these blatantly misogynistic passages “appear to be digressions; they could easily be removed without affecting the storyline in any way.”⁷⁴ They also contradict the honorable behavior displayed throughout the tale by Silence, who, although adopting male attributes, is female by nature. In the final verses, Heldris concludes that “one should praise a good woman / more than one should blame a bad one” because “doing the right thing comes unnaturally to her,”⁷⁵ effectively giving a backhanded compliment to those women he would deem good. To answer Burr’s question, I would argue that although he appears to be proto-feminist by allowing a genitally female character to adopt male roles, his final stripping of her agency and his constant commentaries on women’s character uphold the widespread view of the Middle Ages as a predominantly misogynistic time in history.

⁷⁴ Burr, pp. 40-41.

⁷⁵ *Silence*, p. 313.

Chapter 4. Turning Fiction into Reality: Christine de Pizan's *Ditié Jehanne Darc*

Eh bien ! Quel honneur rendu au sexe féminin ! Dieu fait honneur aux femmes et l'a montré : ce grand peuple de laches qui a ruiné le royaume, a été soumis par une femme qui a accompli ce que des hommes n'auraient pu faire. Elle a mis ces traîtres en déroute. Quelques temps plus tôt, ils n'auraient même pas pu l'imaginer.

-- Christine de Pizan
Le Ditié Jeheanne Darc

After examining the contexts created by Chrétien de Troyes and Heldris de Cornouailles to portray female agency in works of fiction, this final chapter is dedicated to occurrences of female agency not just in fiction but also in the real world. Moving away from fictional representations, I now turn my attention to two women who demonstrated an exceptional sense of agency throughout their lives. Christine de Pizan and Joan of Arc are two female figures from the late 14th and early 15th century who are today celebrated for their accomplishments. While at first the writer and the warrior may not seem to belong in the same study, their lives are in fact intertwined through the former's poem entitled *Le Ditié Jeheanne Darc*. Dedicated to the glory of the Maid of Orléans and her various exploits, this 1429 poem, which mixes history and fiction, can be read as a testimony to the exceptional characteristics of both women: "Christine as a female writer and defender of her sex with the pen and Joan as a female fighter and defender of her sex and her country with her sword."¹

Despite the fact that the texts discussed in my previous chapters are all works of fiction and this final text is concerned with facts that have are believed to be historically accurate, I contend that the *Ditié* is a natural continuation of my study. Indeed, both the writer and the warrior

¹ Christine McWebb, "Joan of Arc and Christine de Pizan: the Symbiosis of Two Warriors in the *Ditié de Jehanne d'Arc*", p. 135.

brought to reality what Chrétien de Troyes and Heldris de Cornouailles portrayed in their fiction. Christine and Joan both embody the image of the female character who discovers and explores her self and her agency as a means to solve a crisis. Additionally, the poem distinguishes itself as a text written by a woman and about a woman in a time when gender roles and society's traditional values were still an impediment to their freedom. The *Ditié* is also notable for being the only text written in French about Joan of Arc during her lifetime; the author mentions the year 1429 in the third stanza of the poem, and we know that the Pucelle was killed in 1431.

Today famous for an impressive corpus composed of a variety of literary genres both in verse and prose, Christine de Pizan is known for being, among other things, a precursor of feminism. Born in the second half of the 14th century (c. 1363) in Italy, she “came to France in the late 1360s when her father took up office as astrologer and physician at the court of Charles V”² and was subsequently raised in Paris. Christine was confronted with the harshness of traditional gender roles at an early age, as her parents had conflicting views on the education she should receive. Her mother had a “traditional feminine opinion, which stifled Christine’s passion for study in favor of ... womanly pursuits”³ while her father preferred her to be educated. Indeed he “educated her in a manner usually accorded intelligent males: a liberal-arts curriculum, including Latin.”⁴ From a young age, therefore, she had the chance to live outside of society’s expectations for women, having received a rare gift for her time. Furthermore, when she became of age to be married, Christine was once again more fortunate than most women in her time: “Son dit père avait choisi pour elle qui n’avait pas quinze ans. Ce choix fut heureux, au gré de Christine.”⁵ (Her father had chosen for her who was not fifteen years old yet). Indeed, while she did not get to choose her

² Curry, Anne. *The Hundred Years' War, 1337-1453*, p. 83.

³ Margolis, Nadia, R B. Palmer, and Tison Pugh. *An Introduction to Christine De Pizan*, p. 2.

⁴ Ibid, p. 3.

⁵ Pinet, Marie J. *Christine De Pisan, 1364-1430: Étude biographique et littéraire*, p. 13.

husband, as was customary then, her father had made sure to select a well-educated suitor who would be able to provide for his family, and, when she married Étienne de Castel c. 1379, Christine was satisfied with the life that had been arranged for her.

Her happiness was short-lived, however, and by the late 1380s, both her father and husband had died: around the age of 25, Christine not only found herself a widow, but also became the sole caretaker for her three children, as well as her mother and possibly other younger family members. As I mentioned when discussing Laudine's predicament in chapter two, widowhood equated to a situation of vulnerability for women, and, in this instance, Christine suffered just like any woman in that position:

Non seulement la jeune veuve manquait de ressources et de protection, mais elle était attaquée par des gens de mauvaise foi qui comptaient sur son ignorance des affaires de son mari et peut-être sur sa naïveté et son découragement pour la tromper. [...] Le train de maison de Thomas de Pisan, au temps de sa prospérité, dut être quasi princier. [...] Elle insiste beaucoup dans sa « *Vision* », sur le grand « *estat* » auquel sa mère était habituée. Elle avoue qu'elle eût mieux aimé mourir que laisser voir sa pauvreté.⁶

(Not only did the young widow lack resources and protection, but she was also attacked by insincere people who were counting on her ignorance of her husband's affairs and perhaps on her naivety and despondency to deceive her. [...] At the time of his prosperity, the lifestyle of Thomas de Pisan's household must have been almost princely. [...] In her "*Vision*," she emphasizes strongly the great "state" to which her mother was accustomed. She admits she would have rather died than to let her poverty be seen.)

She was now unprotected and in financial troubles, having to borrow money to maintain the way of life to which her family was used and being prey to those who hoped to take advantage of her condition. Mirroring the pattern exposed in the previous chapters in which fictional women discover their agency, it is the accumulation of oppressive factors that constitute Christine's crisis. Unlike these literary characters, however, it can be argued that, due to her social status and the education she had received, she had agency before the deaths of her father and husband. Because

⁶ Ibid., pp. 25-26.

of society's stance on gender roles, widows typically remarried or joined a religious order and became nuns. Just as the fictional characters discussed in previous chapters, she had to make a decision. She could either abide by the unspoken rules and join the ranks of women whose lives were dictated by traditional gender roles or go against society's expectations and find her own path. She chose not to remarry, out of love for her deceased husband and also because that choice gave her "the freedom to pursue her literary studies" and avoided her "the potential risk of entering an unhappy marital alliance."⁷ She later expressed this view in her writings, warning women to be careful when deciding to remarry, as a poor alliance could become worse than the state of widowhood. As Keiko Nowacka suggests:

Her choice to remain a widow and not enter a convent could be interpreted therefore as the lived out expression of her belief in women's ability for self-governance. [...] It is, moreover, her decision to pursue a career as a writer that is the clearest indicator of her conscious non-conformity to the acceptable social models open to women.⁸

This decision led to a shift of agency, creating a form of textually productive agency, as it allowed her to develop her talents in a way she could not have if her husband had not died or if she had remarried.

Christine eventually proved herself to be a very prolific writer, with over forty titles ranging in a variety of genres and themes, both in prose and in verse: moral teachings and proverbs, exegetical and conduct manuals for princes and dukes, biography, conduct manual for women, political-theoretical treatise, manual on warfare...⁹ Her entire body of work served her overall goal "to enlighten her adoptive country of France during one of the darkest phases in its history" and "to educate her compatriots out of their crisis," making use of her personal background and her

⁷ Nowacka, Keiko. "Reflections on Christine De Pizan's 'feminism'," p. 83.

⁸ Ibid., p. 84.

⁹ Margolis, Nadia. "From Chrétien to Christine: Translating Twelfth-Century Literature to Reform the French Court during the Hundred Years War," pp. 213-214.

education.¹⁰ She is generally better-known, however, for her commitment to improve the condition of women and to defend them against misogynist discourses which, for her, “cemented the negative essentialist objectification of ‘Woman’ and had a pernicious effect on the male reader, for it encouraged the mistreatment of actual women.”¹¹ This view was most notably expressed in the *Dit de la Rose*, her response to Jean de Meung’s *Roman de la Rose*, which she viewed as a prime example of literature harmful to women. Aside from the *Dit de la Rose*, her most well-known work is probably *Le livre de la cité des dames* (*The Book of the City of Ladies*), in which she names a series of exceptional ladies from the past as role models for her contemporaries and creates a utopian city where women can live and actively participate in society.

Some scholars have argued that her feminism is limited because of the later text *Le trésor de la cité des dames* (*The Treasure of the City of Ladies*, also known as *The Book of the Three Virtues*) in which she seems to accept traditional roles for women and fails to advocate for social reform to advance their position on the socio-political hierarchical structure. Her overall stance on the status of women in society, however, remained the same. For her, improving the condition of women was “achievable not through the dismantling of the established institutional hierarchy but through the teaching of moral values [...] which would improve the relations between the sexes and the treatment of women by men.”¹² Throughout her life, then, she promoted the betterment of society through education and better treatment of women, and as I will demonstrate, the *Ditié de Jeheanne Darc* is both a continuation and a culmination of that work.

One of France’s most famous figures, Joan of Arc also personifies the fictional characters of the previous chapters for she, too, found herself in a complex situation out of which she had to

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 213.

¹¹ Nowacka, p. 89.

¹² Ibid.

find her own way. Born c. 1412¹³ in Domrémy, a small village in the eastern part of the Kingdom of France, she grew up in a modest household with her parents and four siblings. Although she is “often depicted as a *fille du peuple*, it is more accurate to say that, by medieval standards, Joan led something akin to a middle-class existence. Her father owned a vast plot of pasture, fifty acres, with livestock to populate it, and he even held a position within the local government.” She had a seemingly conventional upbringing, learning traditionally female domestic roles. She did not get a formal education, but she received her religious instruction from her mother.¹⁴

She was, however, born in the middle of the Hundred Years War, which presented itself both as a crisis and an opportunity for Joan. In 1412, France and England were in the seventy-fifth year of the conflict and she grew up surrounded not only by war between these two nations but also by a civil war between the Armagnacs and Burgundians, “rival factions [who] were locked in conflict so bitterly that they forgot England was the mortal enemy of France.”¹⁵ By the time she was involved, therefore, Joan was aware of the state of the kingdom. Although the specific circumstances that led her to participate in the war as an actor are unclear, trial records help us piece together her life and contribution. “From the age of thirteen Joan received directives she believed to be supernatural, telling her to be good. The first hint that this mystical experience was war related came when Joan ‘learned that the voices were for the King of France.’”¹⁶ She was to “go to the assistance of Charles VII, the rightful King of France, and to help him drive the English from his kingdom.”¹⁷ She decided to leave her village to fulfill the voices’ commands and, after extensive examination, she eventually convinced the court and was given the leadership of the

¹³ Her birthyear was deduced from Joan’s statement at her trial that she was around 19 years old.

¹⁴ Tara Smithson, “The Mnemonic Maid: Joan of Arc in Public Memory,” p. 4.

¹⁵ Deborah Fraioli. *Joan of Arc and the Hundred Years War*, p. 56.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 58.

¹⁷ Delogu, Daisy. *Allegorical Bodies: Power and Gender in Late Medieval France*, p. 167.

French army in Orléans. There, she successfully regained control of the city from the English, and soon after led Charles to be crowned King in July 1429, thus completing her divine mission.

Examining her life, I argue that Joan was put on a path of greatness at the time she began hearing the voices. Her reaction to what she believed to be a divine intervention shows that, like Christine, she too already had a form of agency before she experienced traumatic events. Indeed, while we tend today to assume that hearing voices in her time was generally categorized as a symptom of mental disorder or as a sign of heresy, the reality was somewhat different. As Tara Smithson clarifies:

To claim communication from the beyond was not uncommon in the Middle Ages. What *was* uncommon was to keep such celestial counsel secret. Stranger still was the idea that Joan could both relay a prophecy and also take an active role in its accomplishment. Normally, one would be expected to consult with the village priest to verify the sanctity of the voices and seek assistance interpreting their message. Often considered a proto-Protestant, Joan expressed neither desire for ecclesiastical counsel nor remorse for not deferring to the church hierarchy. According to her testimony, Joan heard voices for four years, from age thirteen to seventeen, before ever revealing their existence.¹⁸

Joan, therefore, could have continued leading a normal, uneventful life if she had reacted as one was expected to and sought assistance from the local religious authority. We can imagine that she assessed her situation and seemingly made the conscious decision to keep her celestial message a secret. It transpires from her testimonies that she “saw as fundamental and self-evident that a king should have a kingdom [and that] she must have known full well that the kings were crowned and anointed at Reims, roughly four days’ journey away.”¹⁹ At thirteen, she may have understood what was expected of her, but also been aware that as a young woman from a farming family she would not gain access to Charles easily. While she may have decided to follow the voices’ directions, it

¹⁸ Smithson, p. 10.

¹⁹ Fraioli, p. 59.

appears she elected to wait until the circumstances allowed her to make the short journey and approach the king-to-be to deliver her message.

I would argue, therefore, that in lieu of one defining moment, we can see a progression in Joan's display of agency: first, keeping to herself the divine communication she believed she received when she could have asked for help; then deciding to leave Domrémy against her father's orders²⁰ in order to find her way to the dauphin. Finally, if we consider her arrest and subsequent trial to be the traumatic event that changed her life, then her refusal to divulge her divine message when threatened with torture or death can be interpreted as her last demonstration of agency.

Joan's choices in the face of the obstacle warrant her a place in this dissertation as a real-life heir to Chrétien's and Heldris' fictional ladies. Additionally, the events that followed her meeting with the future king make her a successor to Heldris de Cornouailles' portrayal of Silence. Despite the fact that "toutes les représentations médiévales de Jeanne la montrent [...] en vêtement féminin [...] il s'agit évidemment d'une convention qu'aucun artiste ne pense à transgresser."²¹ (every medieval representations of Jeanne show her [...] in female clothes [...] it is obviously a convention that no artist thinks to violate). Just like Silence, Joan donned male clothing, admittedly superior to female dress when leading typically masculine activities, such as horseback riding for long distances. "Her refusal to wear female clothing throughout her imprisonment became symbolic of her blasphemous attitude and behavior"²² and she had to endure the repercussions of her cross-dressing. In Rouen, for instance, she was barred from receiving the sacrament as long as she kept her shameful clothes. Joan initially asserted that she was simply following God's orders; later she also admitted that wearing male clothes was a defense mechanism: as opposed to a dress,

²⁰ Unaware of her divine mission, he feared that her interest in the passing soldiers meant she wanted to join them to share their beds and booze. He threatened to drown Joan if his presentiment became reality. Smithson, p. 10.

²¹ Valérie Toureille, *Jeanne d'Arc*, pp. 221-222.

²² *A History of their Own*, p. 158

pants, boots and tunics protected her from rape, unfortunately common during the war. Valérie Trouveille suggests that Joan exceeded her status as a woman by cross-dressing:

Si elle n'a jamais prétendu être autre chose qu'une femme, elle usurpe la fonction d'un homme en se débarrassant des faiblesses inhérentes à son sexe. D'une certaine manière, elle appartiendrait à un troisième ordre, ni masculin ni féminin, mais surnaturel, comme celui des anges. Mais si Jeanne s'est émancipée de son sexe, elle s'est aussi élevée au-dessus de sa condition.²³

(If she has never pretended to be anything other than a woman, she is usurping the function of a man by getting rid of the weaknesses inherent in her sex. In a way, she would belong to a third order, neither masculine nor feminine, but supernatural, like that of the angels. But if Jeanne has emancipated herself from her sex, she has also risen above her condition.)

While in *Le Roman de Silence* the heroine uses male clothing as a tool to mask her birth gender and assume a masculine identity, Joan inadvertently did so by shedding the weaknesses associated with her sex and with female clothing. Agreeing with Toureille, I would contend that wearing a man's clothes while publicly maintaining her feminine identity allowed Joan to transcend gender roles in a more complete way than Silence did.

In the end, however, Joan's fate turned out to be similar to that of Silence, Laudine, Lunette, Procné and Philomena: after experiencing the freedom and the independence that came with agency, the Maid of Orléans had to pay the price for her appropriation of a traditionally male characteristic. After she was successful in helping Charles VII reclaim his throne, she failed to retake Paris in September 1429. She was abducted by the new king's enemies during the following spring, tried for heresy and, finally, burned at the stake in May 1431. Charles VII and the Church tried to redeem themselves and re-establish her reputation with the Rehabilitation Trial of 1455-56 and her canonization in 1920. While it could be argued that these events also restored her agency, I believe that the permanent aspect of death equally applies to such attributes. By

²³ Toureille, p. 225.

sentencing her to death, then, her judges effectively took away her agency, prematurely ending her exceptionality.

Joan's extraordinary characteristics and the uniqueness of her life story have made her an essential contributor to the history of France, as well as one of the most famous French female figures around the world. As such, she has become a source of inspiration for many authors, who take advantage of the combination of fact and fiction that surround her to bend her image to their imagination.

French poets ranging from Christine de Pizan to Alfred de Musset and Alphonse de Lamartine, playwrights from Charles Péguy to Paul Claudel and Jean Anouilh, and novelists from Alexandre Dumas to Joseph Delteil to Michel Tournier have repeatedly resurrected this unparalleled French heroine to propose creative alternatives to the plethora of historical accounts produced from 1429 to the present day.²⁴

Thanks to all the records that were taken during her three trials,²⁵ we likely know more about Joan than about any other medieval figure.

As well as the minutes of these hearings, several documents written during her lifetime are still extant today: theological treatises and debates surrounding her claim that she had been chosen as messenger by God, correspondence between theologians and royal representatives, Joan's own *Lettre aux Anglais* in which she informs them of her divine mission and warns them that she will fight to the death any who oppose God's will, and Christine's *Ditié de Jehanne d'Arc*. In addition to the poem, I will specifically mention the *De Mirabili Victoria* ("About a Marvelous Victory"), the most popular and influential contemporary treatise written on Joan.

Deborah Fraioli describes the latter as a "pro-Joan polemic, which proclaims its enthusiasm for the Maid in response to the accusations of detractors." She adds that "an obviously vexed author

²⁴ McGrady, Deborah. "Joan of Arc and the Literary Imagination," pp. 18-19.

²⁵ The Poitiers Trial of 1429, the Interrogation of 1431, and the Rehabilitation Trial of 1455-6.

seeks to counter Joan's opponents with his own arguments."²⁶ The *De Mirabili Victoria* is usually attributed to Jean Gerson, former chancellor of the University of Paris, and assumed to have been completed on May 14th, 1429. The author of this treatise offers a number of arguments refuting accusations made against the Maid and explains his reasons for defending her. Among the key elements, he also asserts that she has been chosen by God, he counters the arguments against her use of male clothes and short hair and ends with a warning about the possible consequences of disbelief or ingratitude in the divine help. This text is noteworthy because it shares characteristics with the *Ditié*. Like Christine's poem, this treatise was widely disseminated and in circulation during the summer of 1429. These two texts are also similar due to their authors' intended audience (both Joan's opponents and her supporters) and to the images evoked to illustrate her greatness (biblical figures, saints, mythological warriors).²⁷ This Latin treatise, however, is problematic because there are inconsistencies between what is generally accepted about the text and its content. Fraioli explains that there clues within the treatise that create doubt about the veracity of the title, the date of composition, and even the authorship.²⁸ While the *De Mirabili Victoria* was one of the most circulated text in defense of Joan and remains a valid endorsement of her actions, the lack of verifiable information surrounding it allows Christine's poem to surpass it as the more convincing celebration of the Maid's exploits.

The *Ditié Jeheanne Darc* stands out for a uniqueness due, in large part, to the connection between the author and its source of inspiration. Christine's text is both the only literary work dedicated to the Maid of Orléans and the only text written by a woman during her lifetime.²⁹ Through the poem, an immaterial relationship is created between the author and the soldier. This

²⁶ Deborah Fraioli, *Joan of Arc: the Early Debate*, p. 126.

²⁷ McGrady, pp. 21-22.

²⁸ Fraioli, pp. 131-142.

²⁹ In the final stanza, Christine specifies that she completed the poem on the last day of July 1429.

bond is mutually beneficial: on the one hand, Christine praises Joan's knightly actions, valor and dedication, and, on the other hand, Christine credits the young warrior's daring exploits for helping her come out of a solitary life. She writes:

1. Moi, Christine, qui me suis lamentée onze ans durant, cloîtrée dans une abbaye [...] Aujourd'hui, j'ai envie de rire.
2. La joie m'envahit en cette fin d'hiver durant lequel je me suis tristement tenue en cage. [...]
3. En cette année 1429, le soleil brille à nouveau : il ramène un temps neuf, un temps que beaucoup n'ont pas vu depuis longtemps, plongés qu'ils étaient dans l'affliction. Et je suis de ceux-là ! Mais je ne m'attriste plus de rien, quand je vois maintenant ce qui m'égaie.³⁰

- (1. I, Christine, who have wept for eleven years in a walled abbey [...] now, for the first time, I begin to laugh.
2. I begin to laugh heartily for joy at the departure of the wintry season, during which I was wont to love confined to a dreary cage [...]
3. In 1429 the sun began to shine again. It brings back the good, new season which had not really been seen for a long time – and because of that many people had lived out their lives in sorrow; I myself am one of them. But I no longer grieve over anything, now that I can see what I desire.)

As Deborah McGrady summarizes, “The resulting poem recounts two extraordinary events: that of a young girl who performed heroic feats, past and future; and a silenced poet who resurfaced as an inspired prophet.”³¹

When considering Chrétien's *Philomena* in chapter one, I discussed how Vicki Mistacco uses Virginia Woolf's idea of “a room of one's own” to explain the process Philomena went through to find her voice.³² The young lady, imprisoned by her rapist, converts her isolated cell into a room of her own, a space to reinvent her ability to communicate through artistic production.

³⁰ *Le Ditié Jehanne Darc*, pp. 31-32. Translations of the poem are from Kennedy A. J., and Varty K. *Le Ditié de Jehanne d'Arc*. Oxford, Society for the Study of Medieval Languages and Literatures, 1977.

³¹ McGrady, p. 22.

³² See note 41, in chapter 1.

While Christine has not suffered the trauma that Philomena did, she finds herself in a similar situation: forced to flee Paris to save her life in the aftermath of the 1418 invasion of the capital by Charles' political opponents, she seeks refuge in a monastery. The religious community's rules create their own form of isolation. Christine stays in a room that eventually becomes a place for creation, a place to find freedom.³³ This room of her own, combined with the news of Jeanne's exploits,³⁴ therefore creates a situation particularly conducive to the writer's literary creation.

Developed in that conjunction of circumstances, the *Ditié* is comprised of sixty-one stanzas of octosyllabic verse.³⁵ Though quite short, this text allows the reader to sample different facets of Christine's talent. According to Jean-François Kosta-Théfaine,

cette œuvre polysémique revêt, selon les exégètes modernes, des éléments qui participent à la fois de l'écrit militant, du témoignage historique et politique, de l'exemple féministe, mais aussi du chant religieux. Néanmoins, la caractéristique première de ce texte est d'être un poème [...] et [il] semble bien s'inscrire dans ce que Paul Zumthor appelle (à propos du 'dit'), 'un lyrisme de persuasion qui tient du discours démonstratif ou délibératif.'

(this polysemous work takes on, according to modern exegetes, elements that participate both in militant writing, in historical and political testimony, in the feminist example, as well as in religious song. Nevertheless, the first characteristic of this text is to be a poem [...] and [it] seems to fit well in what Paul Zumthor calls (about the 'said'), 'a lyricism of persuasion which takes the discourse demonstrative or deliberative.')

This account really encapsulates the goal and result of Christine's writing. Her aim with the poem is two-fold: "to celebrate Joan's extraordinary deeds and to argue that these deeds are proof that Joan has divine backing, which is why the country should unite behind her, acknowledge Charles

³³ Mistacco, p. 14.

³⁴ According to Pinet, Christine was most likely keeping up with events unraveling that year, as she celebrates Jeanne's victories immediately Charles' crowning. Pinet, p. 181.

³⁵ The modern French edition I will quote does not maintain the verse format but instead has transformed it into prose.

as the rightful king, and expel the English.”³⁶ To fulfill her objective, Christine includes all the elements mentioned above in Kosta-Théfaine’s description.

Christine’s militancy transpires throughout the poem as she makes her political opinion clear to the reader. For instance, she announces her support to Charles:

5. Voici que l’enfant *légitime* du roi de France, depuis longtemps dans les souffrances et l’ennui, s’approche. [...]

6. Fêtons donc notre roi ! Acclamons son retour ! Réjouis de son noble équipage, allons à sa rencontre [...]³⁷

(5. The reason is that the rejected child of the rightful King of France, who has long suffered many a great misfortune and who now approaches. [...])

6. Now let us greet our King! Welcome to him on his return! Overjoyed at the sight of his noble array, let us all, both great and small, step forward to greet him joyously)

She also identifies those who she sees as the enemies of the kingdom:

39. Anglais, faites taire vos cors, car jamais vous n’aurez de beaux gibiers ! Ne jouez plus en France : vous êtes échec et mat sur l’échiquier ! Vous ne pensiez pas chuter ainsi, vous qui vous montriez si intrépides. [...]

40. Vous avez cru que la France vous était soumise, et qu’elle allait rester vôtre. Partez en d’autres lieux, mauvaise compagnie ! Vous irez ailleurs battre tambour, si vous ne voulez pas connaître le goût de la mort, comme vos compagnons dont les cadavres gisent dans les sillons et que les loups peuvent bien dévorer ! [...]

43. Elle [Jeanne] réduira les Sarrasins en cendres, en conquérant la Terre Sainte. [...]

45. Détruire les Anglais est pourtant la moindre de ses missions ; [...] Dans l’avenir, on s’en moquera. Ils sont vaincus !

54. [...] Paris, tu crois que Bourgogne pourra défendre la ville contre [Charles] ? [...]

55. O ! Paris ! Qui a suivi de mauvais conseils ! Fous habitants sans courage ! [...]

56. Je veux parler bien sûr des traîtres [...]

57. Et vous, villes rebelles, et vous, hommes qui avez renié votre roi, hommes et femmes qui l’avez oublié pour un autre, que tout cela cesse dans la douceur, en demandant pardon !³⁸

(39. And so, you English, draw in your horns for you will never capture any good game ! Don’t attempt any foolish enterprise in France ! You have been check-

³⁶ Brown-Grant, Rosalind. “‘Hee! Quel Honneur au Femenin Sexe!’: Female heroism in Christine de Pizan’s *Ditié de Jeheanne d’Arc*,” p. 19.

³⁷ Christine de Pizan. *Le Dit De Jeanne D’arc: Ditié Jehanne Darc*, pp. 33-34. (my emphasis)

³⁸ Ibid., pp. 50-60.

mated. A short time ago, when you looked so fierce, you had no inkling that this would be so [...]

43. She [Jeanne] will destroy the Saracens, by conquering the Holy Land. [...]

45. And yet destroying the English race is not her main concern [...] In days to come scorn will be heaped on them. They have been cast down !

54. [...] Paris, do you think Burgundy will prevent him from entering ?

55. Oh Paris, how could you be so ill-advised ? Foolish inhabitants, you are lacking in trust ! [...]

56. It is the evil inhabitants I'm referring to [...]

57. And as for you, all you rebel towns, all of you who have renounced your lord, all of you men and women who have transferred your allegiance to another, may everything now be peacefully settled, with you beseeching his pardon !)

By naming specific adversaries, Christine sends a patriotic message guaranteeing that, upon reading the poem, her audience understands where she stands in the conflicts plaguing the kingdom.

As we see, Christine does not hide her political views and her commentaries often also serve as historical and political markers, which assist the audience in finding their spatiotemporal footing. For example, in the third stanza we learn the year at the time of writing ("En cette année 1429"/ In the year 1429);³⁹ Joan's age is in the thirty-fifth stanza ("Une fillette de 16 ans"/ A little girl of sixteen);⁴⁰ or even important and precise information such as Charles' coronation in the forty-ninth stanza ("Charles fut couronné à Reims, aureolé de triomphe et de puissance, sain et sauf sans aucun doute, le 17 juillet 1429, entouré de ses hommes d'armes et de ses barons. Il y demeura plus ou moins cinq jours."/ It was exactly on the 17th day of July 1429 that Charles was, without any doubt, safely crowned at Rheims, amidst great triumph and splendour and surrounded by many men-at-arms and barons; and he stayed there for approximately five days)⁴¹

³⁹ Ibid., p. 32.

⁴⁰ Ibid.,

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 56.

The two remaining elements from Kosta-Théfaine's description are the feminist and religious aspects. The former is quite evident, as the poem is primarily an ode to Joan's status as an exemplary woman. The latter is woven throughout the entire work, as religion is not only closely tied to Joan's story due to her divine communication, but it is also a big part of Christine's life (we can see it through some of her work, such as in the *Oraison à Nostre Dame*, *les Quinze joyes Notre Dame* or *Les heures de contemplacion sur la Passion de Nostre Seigneur*, as well as her prolonged stay at the monastery prior to composing the *Ditié*).

Although she is heavily influenced by religion, Christine does not pretend to be commissioned by God to compose her praise to Joan, his messenger. Instead, the roles in composing the *Ditié* are shared, making it appear as a collective work. Kosta-Théfaine clarifies: "De fait, Christine de Pizan apparaît bien comme un poète qui ne reçoit pas l'inspiration de Dieu, mais qui est influencé par un personnage – en l'occurrence Jeanne d'Arc – qui lui, est une figure inspirée sinon guidée par Dieu, et peut par là-même revêtir le statut de prophète." (In fact, Christine really appears as a poet who does not receive inspiration from God, but instead is influenced by a character – by Joan of Arc as it happens – who is a figure inspired, if not guided, by God, and as such can assume the status of prophet).⁴² The writer, therefore, draws her inspiration to compose the poem from Joan's connection to God.

Concretely, the feminist and religious views are intertwined. For instance, when Christine mentions Joan for the first time in the eleventh stanza, she ties her arrival to God's good will for France: "C'est une chose digne de mémoire, que Dieu ait voulu, par la venue d'une jeune vierge, étendre sa grâce sur la France." (It is knowledge worth remembering, that God had wanted, through

⁴² Kosta-Théfaine, p. 43.

the arrival of a young virgin, extend his grace over France). ⁴³ In the thirteenth stanza, she addresses Charles directly to insist on the source of his current fortunes:

13. Et toi, Charles, roi des Français, septième de ce noble nom, qui a eu à soutenir une si grande épreuve sans qu'elle te rapporte beaucoup. Vois ton renom, à travers la grâce de Dieu, élevé si haut par la Pucelle, victorieuse de tes ennemis sous ta propre bannière – comme la chose est nouvelle ! – ⁴⁴

(13. And you Charles, King of France, seventh of that noble name, who have been involved in such a great war before things turned out at all well for you, now, thanks be to God, see your honour exalted by the Maid Who has laid low your enemies beneath your standard (and this is new!))

Christine ensures that Joan's role in returning Charles to the throne of France is well-known, along with the notion that the Maid of Orléans' accomplishments are made possible by God's will.

To emphasize Joan's superiority, the poetess interweaves religious and literary references (respectively the Judeo-Christian Bible and Greek mythology) that her readership would have likely known. For instance, she calls upon heroines from the Old Testament:

28. Esther, Judith et Déborah furent des femmes méritantes, grâce auxquelles Dieu soulagea son peuple prisonnier. J'en connais d'autres qui furent très courageuses et à qui Dieu permit d'accomplir de nombreux miracles. Il a fait davantage encore grace à cette jeune fille. ⁴⁵

(28. I have heard of Esther, Judith and Deborah, who were women of great worth, through whom God delivered His people from oppression, and I have heard of many other worthy women as well, champions every one, through them He performed many miracles, but He has accomplished more through this Maid.)

By associating Joan's achievements with feats accomplished by these biblical figures, Christine hints at Joan's possible prophetic quality and insists on the fact that she received her mission from

⁴³ *Ditié*, p. 36.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

God. Associated with Deborah, a prophetess who freed her people from servitude and the only female judge mentioned in the Bible, Joan too appears to be a strong and unstoppable savior:

35. Une fillette de 16 ans, n'est-ce pas extraordinaire, qui ne sent pas le poids des armes et qui semble avoir été élevée dans ce but, tant elle est forte et résistante ! Les ennemis s'enfuient devant elle, personne ne résiste.

36. Aux yeux de tous, elle agit ainsi, délivre la France de ses ennemis, en reconquérant villes et châteaux. Jamais puissance ne fut si grande, même avec une armée de centaines ou de milliers d'hommes ! Elle est la souveraine de nos hommes courageux et efficaces. Ni Hector, ni Achille ne déploierent autant de forces. C'est le fait de Dieu, son guide.⁴⁶

(35. A little girl of sixteen (isn't this something quite super natural?) who does not even notice the weight of the arms she bears – indeed her whole upbringing seems to have prepared her for this, so strong and resolute is she! And her enemies go fleeing before her, not one of them can stand up to her.

36. She does all this in full view of everyone, and drives her enemies out of France, recapturing castles and towns. Never did anyone see greater strength, even in hundreds or thousands of men! And she is the supreme captain of our brave and able men. Neither Hector nor Achilles had such strength! This is God's doing : it is He who leads her.)

Christine compares Joan to fictional celebrated warriors, telling us that the young girl showed more strength than Homer's Hector and Achilles, which places her in a position to lead armies of men.

She also draws a parallel between the young woman soldier and Moses:

23. Que peut-on dire d'autre concernant les grands faits accomplis ou les temps passés ? Moïse, à qui Dieu a donné grâces et vertus, a sorti, sans jamais se décourager, le peuple de Dieu des Terres d'Égypte. Ce fut un miracle. Toi, Pucelle élue, tu nous as sauvés de ces tourments.⁴⁷

(23. And what more can be said of any other person or of the great deeds of the past? Moses, upon whom God in His bounty bestowed many a blessing and virtue, miraculously and indefatigably led God's people out of Egypt. In the same way, blessed Maid, you have led us out of evil!)

⁴⁶ Ibid., pp. 48-49.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 42.

With this reference, Christine equates Moses' actions – freeing the Hebrew people from Egyptian tyranny – to Jeanne's success in liberating Orléans. What's more, this comparison with one of the most important prophets of the Judeo-Christian religion further highlights Joan's prophetic aspect.

In the final stanzas, Christine predicts that the city of Paris, occupied by the Burgundians, will not be able to defend itself against the newly crowned Charles VII, assisted by Joan and, through her, by God. However, the writer was not heard from after July 1429⁴⁸ and may not have lived long enough to witness Joan's failure in Paris. Nevertheless, her prediction demonstrates her complete faith in Joan's exceptionality and in her determination to carry out her celestial mission.

In writing this poem to the glory of Joan, Christine draws upon her previous writings and a style she has used in the past: she reprises the role of biographer she perfected in *The Book of the City of Ladies*. In this book written c. 1405 and intended to be “a convincing and erudite response to the entire misogynistic scholarly tradition”⁴⁹ (particularly Jean de Meun's *Roman de la Rose*), Christine designs an allegorical city to house female figures from the past where each of them becomes a metaphorical building block. Through writing these short biographies celebrating the lives of these famous ladies, Christine effectively produced “the first known history of women by a woman.”⁵⁰ In a way, her work in the *Ditié* can be interpreted as a continuation of *The Book of the City of Ladies*, as her praise for Joan resembles the individual sections dedicated to the women mentioned in the construction of the city.

Furthermore, in stanza 28, she compares Joan to three women she's already paid tribute to: Esther, Judith and Deborah are included in the *City of Ladies* and are all three portrayed as chosen by God to save his people from suffering. Not only does the Maid's destiny mirrors that of these

⁴⁸ Pinet, p. 200.

⁴⁹ Ranalli, Tina-Marie. “Christine de Pizan's Metaphoric Womb,” p. 33.

⁵⁰ Margolis, *An Introduction to Christine de Pizan*, p. 70.

three biblical figures, but Christine goes even further by adding that God accomplishes even more through Joan than he has through her predecessors.

The final connection I would like to make between the writer and the warrior is one over which they have no control. While Christine never heard voices the way Joan did, she imagined herself to be the recipient of a divine task about seven years before the Maid's birth. In *The Book of the City of Ladies*, Christine as protagonist of her book, explains that she is chosen by God to defend women. She receives the visit of three ladies, allegories representing Reason, Rectitude, and Justice. They announce to Christine-protagonist that her mission is rooted in the endless abuse women have suffered:

Dans leur bonté naïve, suivant en cela le précepte divin, les femmes ont souffert patiemment et courtoisement les grandes insultes qu'on leur a faites, à leur tort et préjudice, tant par parole que par écrit, s'en rapportant à Dieu de leur bon droit. Mais l'heure est venue d'ôter cette juste cause des mains de Pharaon, et c'est pour cela que tu nous vois ici toutes trois. Nous t'avons prise en pitié et venons t'annoncer la construction d'une Cité ; c'est toi qui a été choisie pour construire et fermer, avec notre aide et conseil, cette citadelle hautement fortifiée. Seules y habiteront les femmes illustres de bonne renommée, car les murs de notre Cité seront interdits à toutes celles qui seront dépourvues de vertus.⁵¹

(And the simple, noble ladies, following the example of suffering which God commands, have cheerfully suffered the great attacks which, both in the spoken and the written word, have been wrongfully and sinfully perpetrated against women by men who all the while appealed to God for the right to do so. Now it is time for their just cause to be taken from Pharaoh's hands, and for this reason, we three ladies whom you see here, moved by pity, have come to you to announce a particular edifice built like a city wall, strongly constructed and well founded, which has been predestined and established by our aid and counsel for you to build, where no one will reside except all ladies of fame and women worthy of praise, for the walls of the city will be closed to those women who lack virtue.)

With her most famous work in which she takes on the task to create a city where virtuous ladies can live sheltered from the rampant misogyny of the world, Christine created a parallel between herself and Joan, over twenty years before the Maid of Orléans was even born. In her fictional

⁵¹ Christine de Pizan, *La cité des dames*, p.42. Translation by Earl Jeffrey Richards.

creation, God, through the three allegories, orders Christine as protagonist to undertake the defense of women. In Joan's reality, God spoke to her and asked her to help Charles regain his kingdom, which should be for the benefit of the entire kingdom. While this parallel between their lives seems coincidental, I believe it is yet another sign indicating that Christine and Joan were destined to play a part in each other's lives.

To conclude, I would like to point out the combined legacy of these two exceptional women. First, the ongoing flow of scholarly publications focused either on Christine, or on Joan, or even on the two women together, indicates a continuing interest in their lives and illustrates their long-lasting influence on academia. For instance, Joan was the subject of two biographies published in 2020: *Jeanne d'Arc* by Valérie Toureille (Perrin, 2020) and *Jeanne d'Arc et son époque : essais sur le XV^e siècle français* by Philippe Contamine (Les éditions du Cerf, 2020.) Similarly, Christine is the subject of a forthcoming study titled *Diamant obscure. Interpréter les manuscrits de Christine de Pizan* in which Sarah Delale examines Christine's work through the lenses of codicology and literary theories (Droz, 2021). The two women are also studied simultaneously. For instance, they are side by side in *The 100 Most Influential Women of All Time* (edited by Kathleen Kuiper, Britannica Educational Publication, 2010) or in *Stories of Women in the Middle Ages* (Maria Teresa Brolis, McGill-Queen's University Press, 2018).

Additionally, Christine is the main character of a series of mystery novels set in 14th century France by Tania Bayard, with the fourth tome to be released in April 2021 (*Murder in the Cloister*, Severn House Publishers, 2021). A biopic titled *Christine Christina* released in 2009 told the story of her life. This movie and the murder series show the relevance of Christine's name and influence beyond scholarly interest. Several movies telling Joan's story were made over the course of the last century, the latest of which is a French film released in 2019 and is a sequel to a 2016 movie

centered on the Maid's childhood. Joan is also a well-liked figure in various other popular media: she inspired or influenced music, television series, video games, and comic books, among others. Politicians still draw inspiration from her historical significance today, just like medieval imagery in general. Furthermore, her influence is visible around the world. In New Orleans, Louisiana, for instance, she is celebrated annually during Mardi Gras season, a phenomenon examined by Tara Smithson in her doctoral dissertation.

Just as I suggested that Chrétien de Troyes was a literary pioneer for his initial experimentations with representations of female agency in works of fiction, Christine de Pizan and Joan of Arc both became pioneers in their own way. They lived exemplary lives that transformed them into role models, leading the way for women to fight back against society's still prevalent traditional definition of gender roles and take control of their destinies in real life.

Conclusion. Female Agency, Medieval Studies, and 21st Century Teaching Methodologies

Feminism and Medieval Studies: Where Have We Been, Where Are We Now, and Where Are We Going? Or, What Has Happened to Women in Feminist Studies of the Middle Ages?
Elizabeth Robertson

As I began doing research on gender roles and the place occupied by female characters in fiction, I realized that although agency seemed to be a prevalent aspect of literature, it had not been the subject of any major studies. I soon came to the conclusion that this absence was due, in part, to the fact that for a long time medieval scholarship had been dominated by men, whose focus was typically either on topics related the male characters or had nothing to do with gender issues. Elizabeth Robertson's questions¹ above are a perfect representation of the status of feminist studies in the greater field of medieval studies: while there have been more studies involving both fields in the past few decades, it is important to take the time to assess what has been done, what is currently being studied, and, maybe more importantly, in what new directions we can take our research.

The purpose of this dissertation, therefore, was to begin filling this space in feminist medieval scholarship. By examining what I argue to be some of the first representations of female agency in French literature, I intend to show that it is a central theme in most literary traditions. Since gender roles have been unbalanced in similar ways in most societies, it is safe to assume that we can find similar depictions of female characters in literature across time and space. I believe that the stories I have analyzed in my chapters are not unique in the sense that they share a common ending.

¹ The quote is the title of Robertson's afterword to *Founding Feminisms in Medieval Studies, Essays in Honor of E. Jane Burns*, a collection edited by Laine E. Doggett and Daniel E. O'Sullivan published in 2016.

When authors portray extraordinary or unconventional women, they also include some form of punishment in these characters' stories or end the tales in a way that takes away their agency. Thus, they reestablish the power differential in favor of male characters and satisfy society's expectations by restoring the accepted gender roles. Sara Ahmed reads the story called "The Willful Child" by the Grimm brothers about a little girl who refuses to obey her mother² and observes that

If authority assumes the right to turn a wish into a command, then willfulness is a diagnosis of the failure to comply with those whose authority is given. The costs of such a diagnosis are high: through a chain of command (the mother, God, the doctors) the child's fate is sealed. [...] Willfulness is thus compromising; it compromises the capacity of a subject to survive, let alone flourish.³

We can apply this analysis to the disobedient female characters in this corpus by putting them in the place of the child and by considering the authority and chain of command to be represented by Church, society, and the authors. Willful female characters are at risk as they go against society's wishes. Ahmed later adds the idea that "the story gives us a portrait of obedience as a virtue. We could thus consider how the project of eliminating willfulness relates to obedience."⁴ Similarly, while multiple characters embody this virtue, those who disobey and reject this virtue face the consequences of their actions. While the child in the Grimm brothers' story dies, we can compare her fate to the loss of agency experienced by the fictional characters studied in this dissertation:

- Philomena and Procné commit a heinous crime and are transformed into birds,
- Fénice and Laudine are married in the end, a situation I contend is akin to a loss of agency in a medieval society,

² See appendix for the complete story.

³ *Willful Subjects*, p. 1.

⁴ *Ibid*, p. 63.

- Silence is forced to upset her life and assume a gender identity she previously rejected and is also coerced into marriage by the king.

In addition to these imagined characters, Joan of Arc's well-known fate is equally somber: although she was later declared innocent, she was burned at the stake accused of being a heretic, therefore losing any agency she had gained during her life.

Literature, as a form of art, reflects aspects of our reality as it draws from it for inspiration; we use it not only to represent characteristics of our society that we enjoy, but also, and more importantly, to experiment with facets we would rather change. Observing the constant recurrence of the same ideas for improvement, therefore, should be a warning. We have seen, throughout the Middle Ages, that authors continually incorporate the theme of female agency developing as a consequence of trauma or crises. From Chrétien de Troyes' 12th-century explorations to Christine de Pizan's 15th-century praise of a real-life heroine, and through the centuries until today, the message is simple: our society has, for a long time now, been concerned with its treatment of women and with gender roles, and these authors' work will remain relevant until we implement substantial changes.

Although in my dissertation I focus on French texts, the phenomenon I have exposed is not limited to French literature but can be found in works from authors of all origins. I wish to expand the comparative aspect of my research by studying other European literatures of the same period. For instance, I intend on developing the first chapter of my dissertation, "From Philomela to Philomena: transposing the myth in the 12th century," where I explore the context in which the author introduced agency for female characters in fiction by translating the tale of Philomela from Ovid's *Metamorphosis* and adapting it to the culture of the 12th century. This chapter also demonstrates that, in these literary works, the development of agency is portrayed as a response to

a traumatic event – rape in the story of Philomena – and the subsequent exploration of this new-found agency is the female character’s only avenue to survive her experience. By modifying and adapting Ovid’s original story to 12th-century French culture, Chrétien de Troyes promoted the idea of female agency in medieval literature. I am interested in studying Chrétien’s work in a comparative approach with Chaucer’s “Legend of Philomela,” Gower’s “Tale of Tereus,” and other retellings of the myth.

Furthermore, I want to show that this theme is not unique to European literature by expanding my research on female agency presented in chapter three, dedicated to *Le Roman de Silence*. I am interested in developing my work on gender roles and female agency by looking further into queer theory all the while studying Silence side by side with the Chinese legend of Hua Mulan. While her name is most famous for the 1998 children’s animated movie she inspired, there are similarities between this 4th-century Chinese folk legend and Heldenris’ 13th -century French tale:

The legend of Mulan—the maiden who performed heroic deeds in battle while dressed as a male soldier—appeared in China some time between the fourth and the sixth centuries and now is well known in North America [...]
a young woman takes the place of her elderly father in war, serves her country valiantly in disguise as a man, and returns home with triumph and honor to resume her womanly life. Mulan’s tale, despite its journey across time, geography, and cultures, continues to be about a young woman’s successful transgression.⁵

From this brief summary of the tale, we can see how the two female characters compare: both hide their birth gender to protect their father’s honor, accomplish traditionally male feats, and, in the end, assume a female identity. There are, of course, differences between the two – for instance, the events that lead them to cross-dress – but I believe that examining these stories together would allow us to see connections between the European Middle Ages and other parts of the world.

⁵ Dong, Lan. *Mulan's Legend and Legacy in China and the United States*, p. 1.

I am also interested in the myth of Scheherazade, as I believe it to be a great display of female agency. Although their stories are very different, I believe Chretien's *Énide* and the storyteller of *One Thousand and One Nights* share similarities: they are both encouraged to find their voice by the fear of death. *Énide* speaks out in defiance of her husband, as they are on adventures and he ignores her. She must warn him that they are about to be attacked or suffer the physical pain of the assault. Similarly, Scheherazade chooses to tell a long story to draw the sultan's attention in hopes that he will be so enthralled by the tale he will change his mind and not kill her.

Additionally, I wish to expand the research presented in my dissertation by creating connections between medieval literatures and cultures and modern representations of these medieval topics. I mentioned above that there are recurring themes in literature, some topics being particularly favored by authors. A conclusion that can be drawn from the cyclical aspect of literary themes has to do with the relevance of our chosen sources of inspiration: we repeat ourselves because there is value in learning from our past, and there are not many topics or issues that have not yet been addressed. As such, in recent decades we have seen multiple literary works from different genres based on accounts of the Middle Ages. The most popular of these are works of fiction that belong to the fantasy genre; for instance, J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* series, Ursula K. Le Guin's *Earthsea Cycle*, Guy Gavriel Kay's *Fionavar Tapestry*, and Georges R.R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire*. Although the accuracy of these authors' representations of the medieval period can be debated, I believe that their work is significant because of the manner in which it mirrors modern society's concerns, such as gender, race, climate change, political corruption, religious extremism for instance.⁶ This literary genre allows us to distance ourselves

⁶ For analyses of such themes in these works, see for example: Michael Skeparnides "A Reflection on Tolkien's World – Gender, Race & Interpreted Political, Economic, Social & Cultural Allegories by Michael Skeparnides"

from these recurring issues and analyze them in a context that is both somewhat familiar (the medieval-based setting) and completely foreign (the fantastic universe).

In future endeavors, I would like to further study the representation of female agency by looking at these medieval-inspired modern fantasies. I would argue that the authors portray female agency from the perspective of the 20th and 21st centuries – that is to say bearing in mind recent social progress in terms of women's rights and gender roles – all the while hiding the fact that little has changed since the Middle Ages behind typical representations of women in medieval literature.

I believe that these texts, as well as other forms of modern media, can be great pedagogical tools. As it becomes increasingly difficult to capture our students' attention, both in and out of the classroom, it seems more and more essential to find new techniques to pull them back to the humanities. I am particularly interested in researching and developing innovative methodologies to teach and renew interest in medieval studies. While in recent years the Middle Ages have been a preferred source of inspiration (whether for entertainment purposes or political motives), the information conveyed by the media is often flawed and leads to distorted representations of the period. Instead of seeing it as an obstacle, I suggest we consider this current interest in medieval matters as an opportunity to develop a more modern approach to the teaching of medieval studies. Taking into consideration the new challenges brought on by the global health crisis – primarily the

(<https://www.sffworld.com/1999/01/a-reflection-on-tolkiens-world/>), Sue Kim "Beyond Black and White: Race and Postmodernism in *The Lord of the Rings* Films" (*Modern Fiction Studies*. 50.4 (2004): 875-907), Patrícia Branco "Exploring Justitia Through Éowyn and Niobe: on Gender, Race and the Legal" (*Liverpool Law Review : a Journal of Contemporary Legal and Social Policy Issues*. 38.1 (2017): 63-82), Laura B. Comoletti and Michael D. C. Drout. "How They Do Things with Words: Language, Power, Gender, and the Priestly Wizards of Ursula K. Le Guin's Earthsea Books" (*Children's Literature*. 29.1 (2009): 113-141), Gabrielle Bellot "How Le Guin's *A Wizard of Earthsea* Subverts Racism (But Not Sexism)" (<https://www.tor.com/2018/10/30/how-le-guins-a-wizard-of-earthsea-subverts-racism-but-not-sexism>), Weronika Łaszkiewicz "Phenomenology of Religion and the Study of Modern Fantasy Literature." (*Acta Neophilologica*. (2014): 179-189), Abby Williams "7 Brilliant Ways Game of Thrones Mirrors Modern Society" (<http://bamni.co.uk/2016/08/21/brilliant-ways-game-thrones-mirrors-modern-society/>), Katherine Tucker "Violence, Politics, and Religion: Cosmic War in Game of Thrones" (*Fafnir*. 4 (2017): 54-66), William Clapton and Laura J. Shepherd "Lessons from Westeros: Gender and Power in Game of Thrones" (*Politics*. 37.1 (2017): 5-18)

shift to remote learning – I intend to create innovative courses combining the field of medieval studies with other fields or topics that can relate to the Middle Ages, as well as to incorporate modern media and technology. Such classes will involve, for instance, examining the accuracy of medieval references in video games; studying the importance of sports in medieval literature and society; or even combining medieval studies with political science and journalism where students might analyze the references to the Middle Ages on Twitter, for example. I would argue that by creating such classes, and therefore attracting new students to the fields, scholars could engage their work with the socio-political and academic climate and become more relevant in academia.

Furthermore, I am confident that it is in our best interest as scholars and educators to find ways to appeal to younger generations of students, not only by applying themes and discussions of the “canon” to modern texts, but also by transcending the academic barriers of genre or language when appropriate (a French scholar, for example, should not bar anglophone literature merely for not being francophone; and vice-versa). In this regard, series such as Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* and Martin’s *A Song of Ice and Fire* fulfill several needs: they were published within the last century (respectively in the 1950s and the 1990s until today), they deal with themes borrowed from medieval romances, and they famously display an imaginary universe based on historical accounts of the Middle Ages.⁷ These authors and their work are also immensely popular and have been hard to escape in the past few decades. They have been adapted for the cinema, the television, the radio, the stage, as well as for video games. Martin’s work has also been made into a comic book. Consequently, a majority of the younger generations have at the very least an idea of what their work is, which makes using it in the classroom a feasible task.

⁷ Many scholarly studies have been conducted on this topic. Amongst the most recent publications, see for example *Tolkien the Medievalist* by Jane Chance, *The keys of Middle-earth: discovering medieval literature through the fiction of J.R.R. Tolkien* by Stuart D. Lee and Elizabeth Solopova, *Medievalism in A Song of Ice and Fire and Game of Thrones* by Shiloh Carroll, *Winter is Coming: the medieval world of Game of Thrones* by Carolyne Larrington.

In recent years, professors from a diversity of fields have discussed the challenges they face in the classroom and have sought to modernize our approach to medieval studies. Anne Harris and Jason Lief talk about problems and strategies in teaching medieval culture, particularly in regard to religion.⁸ Colleen Donnelly looks for ways to engage students who know very little about the Middle Ages, except for the (often erroneous) representations they see in the media. Jane Chance examines Tolkien's views and representations of the Other in his series.⁹ Among these new methods, some have looked for ways to incorporate these fantasy series to teach outside of the typical fields of humanities related to literature. Gulnara Karimova, for example, "presents an approach to illustrate fundamental theories of business ethics through the use of the television series *Game of Thrones*"¹⁰ and concludes that it proved to be an effective tool. These studies prove not only that we need more engaging strategies to teach topics related to medieval studies, but also that Martin's *Game of Thrones* is an adequate medium for contemporary students.

⁸ Harris, Anne. "Medieval Belief and Modern Secularity: Teaching the Middle Ages to Contemporary College Students." *Literature Compass*, 10/12, 2013, pp. 895-899; Lief, Jason. "Challenging the Objectivist Paradigm: Teaching Biblical Theology with J. R. R. Tolkien, C. S. Lewis, and Guillermo del Toro." *Teaching Theology & Religion*, v12 n4, 2009, p321-332.

⁹ Donnelly, Colleen. "Actively Engaging Students in Culture, Gender, and Class Issues in Medieval Literature." *The CEA Forum*, Vol. 46, No.1, 2017, pp. 29-41; Chance, Jane. *Tolkien, self and Other: "this queer creature."* Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.

¹⁰ Karimova, Gulnara Z. "The Game of Thrones as a Teaching Tool: Enhancing Engagement and Student Learning Outcomes." *e-journal of Business Education & Scholarship of Teaching*, Vol.12, No.2, 2018, pp. 141-154.

Appendix. The Willful Child

"The Willful Child", as cited in *Willful Subjects*:

Once upon a time there was a child who was willful, and would not do as her mother wished. For this reason God had no pleasure in her, and let her become ill, and no doctor could do her any good, and in a short time she lay on her death-bed. When she had been lowered into her grave, and the earth was spread over her, all at once her arm came out again, and stretched upwards, and when they had put it in and spread fresh earth over it, it was all to no purpose, for the arm always came out again. Then the mother herself was obliged to go to the grave, and strike the arm with a rod, and when she had done that, it was drawn in, and then at last the child had rest beneath the ground.

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Vita

Mathilde was born in La Rochelle, France, where she spent most of her childhood. In 2013, she received her BA from the Université de Poitiers, France, majoring in English Literature, Language and Civilization. The following year, Mathilde began her graduate studies at the University of Oregon, in Eugene, OR, where she completed her MA in French Studies in 2015. After working at the Alliance Française in Portland, OR, teaching French classes of all levels to all age groups, Mathilde joined Louisiana State University in 2016 for her doctoral degree. She taught various courses in French language, conversation, culture and literature, and was the assistant to the Language Program Coordinator from 2019 to 2021. She served as research assistant for LSU's Center of French and Francophone Studies between 2018 and 2019. She was also the assistant to the director of LSU in Paris, a summer study abroad program, from 2017 to 2019. Mathilde's academic interests include medieval and Renaissance literature, feminist critique and women and gender studies, comparative literatures, and pedagogy and innovative classroom methodologies. Her personal interests include traveling and cooking.